

**Language, History and the Ideal of Bildung**  
**Theories of Interpretation and the Role of Ideals in Reasoning**

Floris Solleveld

Doctoraalscriptie Wijsbegeerte  
Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen  
Universiteit van Amsterdam

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Begeleiders:

Dr. Michiel Leezenberg

Prof. dr. Josef Früchtl

Studentnummer 0015245

[floris.solleveld@student.uva.nl](mailto:floris.solleveld@student.uva.nl)

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## Introduction

### Bildung, Reason and Ideals

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This thesis is about the ideal of Bildung. By that I mean a container notion that rose to prominence in German cultural ideology around 1800. It was used to argue for self-development, general education, the formative value of art and knowledge, the unity of the sciences, the importance of the classics, the study of language and history, the independence of philosophy, and some other things. This thesis, however, is not about cultural ideology in Germany around 1800, but about contemporary philosophy of language and perspectives on intellectual history.

Let me justify my choice with an anecdote. It is from the ‘Intellectual Autobiography’ of one the central figures of my thesis, Donald Davidson, and describes an episode when he was a fresh graduate, around the time America joined the war:

At some point during this period [1941] Werner Jaeger joined the faculty of Harvard. Used to the ways of German academia, he cast around for someone to become his follower and menial. Who was there who both knew Greek and was interested in philosophy? He settled on me, and started inviting me to dinner once a week at his house. I was naturally impressed; he was the man who had written the three volumes of *Paideia*, and revised the accepted chronology for the composition of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. At dinner there was always his hospitable, but silent, wife, and his pleasingly plump teenaged daughter. After the meal we went into his study and he recounted the history of German classical scholarship. Each week we advanced a generation or so; I learned what students each man had produced, where he had taught, and what he had contributed to the subject. Finally we came to the present time and place: there before me was the great teacher, and there was I, the intended putty. It dawned on me that the compliant daughter was to be part of the deal.<sup>1</sup>

So Davidson backed off, and joined the navy, to emerge as a leading philosopher of language twenty-five years later.

Werner Jaeger had been the golden boy of philology, professor in Basel at 26, successor to Williamowitz at 33. With *Paideia*, he had tried, and failed, to stir a ‘third humanism’ (Humboldt and Goethe representing the second). Among the many émigré intellectuals, he was perhaps the greatest representative of an uprooted mandarin culture.

Donald Davidson represents something different. He became a philosopher’s philosopher, writing essays on the square inch. In his spare time, he was a world traveller, a fellow traveller, an aviator, a

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Intellectual Autobiography’, in Lewis Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, p. 24

mountain climber, designed his own house, spoke more languages than Jaeger, had an interest in music, ballet and theatre, dabbled in painting, and followed the first ever academic course on Joyce. And he knew Greek. In short, he was every inch as *gebildet* as Werner Jaeger. Only, it doesn't show off in his work.

I cannot make Davidson say 'Bildung'. Arguments from his philosophy of language, however, can be used in support of an updated notion of Bildung. This is what Richard Rorty did, taking the arguments off the square inch, and what John McDowell did, on his own square inch. Comparing these debates in philosophy of language to perspectives on intellectual history, and using arguments of Davidson's against hermeneutics, discourse theory and metahistory, and for a different view on historical semantics, I shall do like Rorty more than like McDowell. Only I hope to do so less leisurely.

This thesis is about the ideal of Bildung, and about the role of ideals in reasoning. The two topics interlock. What aroused my interest in the ideal of Bildung first was its marginal position as a philosophical topic, a cultural phenomenon infected with philosophy rather than the subject of a Theory of Bildung. This offered an opportunity of investigating the relations between philosophy and its fellow disciplines. In the course of these investigations, however, I soon found it hard to attribute a role to 'Bildung' in intellectual history without treating the word as an agent or an object. In order to make sense of what people were actually doing in using it, I had to ask a more general and pompous question. This question goes:

What are ideals, and how do they work?

The ideal of Bildung was a good case in point. If not by waxing metaphysical, the only way to answer this pompous question seemed to me to develop a theory of interpretation: what do people do by invoking ideals, and what role does it play in the society of meanings, reasons and motivations that they live by? For a start, I took ideals to be conceptions of how things should be, and required a theory of interpretation that would account for their role in language and history. Bildung was a good example because of its elective affinities: as an ideal that assigns a formative value to knowledge, that ranges over language, history, art and the human sciences in general, it is not merely the subject for a theory of interpretation, it is a possible *motivation* for such a theory as well. Investigating the ideal of Bildung, then, was a way of turning theories of interpretation upon themselves.

With that, the question about the role of ideals came to be applied to the role of ideals in theories of interpretation. This too provided another opportunity to investigate the relations between philosophy and fellow disciplines, because the problems that inhere such theories are at least partly philosophical disciplines, but the theory finds its application outside the field of philosophy, in this case, history and the science of language. Those reciprocal relations are an issue for the philosophy of science, and in that sense my exploration of the uses of Bildung indeed belongs to that discipline. (One could motivate it with a doctrine associated closely with Bildung, the Unity of Science.)

This is a far cry from the notion of Bildung that defined a period in intellectual history, the age of Herder, Humboldt, Goethe and Schiller, the German Idealists and the Early Romantics - what I shall call the Bildung revolt. Indeed, focussing upon the role of ideals in reasoning and its consequences for a theory of interpretation, the uses of Bildung that come to light are re-implementations. Part I concerns contemporary philosophy of language; Part II deals with hermeneutics, metahistory and historical semantics. In Part I, the notion of Bildung is discussed as it surfaces, with intended anachronism, in the work of Rorty and McDowell; in Part II, various ways of drawing morals from the writing of history are put at scrutiny, ranging from thinking with history to unmasking or inventing history. Of course, these re-implementations invite a comparison with the Bildung revolt, and the theories of interpretation will be examined on what they make of that, but on the whole the goal is to construct a notion of Bildung for the present rather than to reconstruct a notion from the past. Why 'Bildung' is the *mot juste*, however, instead of some neologism, remains a matter of historical accuracy.

The arguments of Davidson's that I shall use are against the idea that there exist 'conceptual schemes' that organize experience into knowledge, and that there is some such thing as language 'governed by learned rules and conventions'. To replace these assumptions, Davidson posits a 'constitutive ideal of rationality' in the interpretation of speech and action. In chapter 2 of Part I, this is discussed, and prompts the question about the role of ideals in reasoning. Rorty tries to be Davidsonian without such a weighty notion of rationality, explaining speech and action from the norms that abide in language games instead. Bildung, in his view, is a better ideal than rationality. McDowell finds the 'constitutive ideal' a mystification, and claims that there is nothing mysterious about language and reason if viewed as a product of Bildung. That fills chapters 3 and 4. In chapter 5, through the work Quentin Skinner, a link is laid between philosophy of language and historical interpretation, between Part I and Part II.

Part II discusses theories for intellectual history from the perspective of Part I. It asks what these theories make of the role of ideals in reasoning and the ideal of Bildung, and how ideals, Bildung in particular, are operative in them. It does so by pairing philosophical views with historical heuristics that follow the same vein. Chapter 2 of Part II is about Hans-Georg Gadamer, who views history as an ongoing dialogue and language as fundamentally metaphorical. It is also about Reinhart Koselleck, who has applied Gadamer's hermeneutics to historical semantics. Dietrich Busse attacked Koselleck's programme as outdated, invoking Foucault, Kuhn and Wittgenstein. Chapter 3 compares Busse's view on historical semantics to my view on Davidson's. Chapter 4 deals with Richard Rorty once more: Rorty, in his work on historiography and literature, tends towards the position of Hayden White, who describes the historical text as a literary artefact. After rejecting this tendency, and the consequences for how one could use 'Bildung', Chapter 5 presents my conclusions.

Part III, by way of epilogue, offers some outlooks.





## I. Language

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## 1. Three Remarks and Two Questions

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There are three remarks that I would take for a starting point. These are the following:

1. In many essays spanning four decades, Donald Davidson has argued that in order to understand someone we must represent his beliefs as coherently as possible, and that we cannot make sense of the actions, decisions and utterances of a person without reference to a set of norms or standards of rationality. In 'Mental Events', he has described this condition as a 'constitutive ideal of rationality'. Under this condition, there is no possibility of reducing rational behaviour to physical description: for any theory of action or meaning, 'the constitutive ideal of rationality controls every phase in the evolution of what must be an evolving theory'.<sup>2</sup>
2. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty claims that with the collapse of the analytic/synthetic-distinction, there is room for a particular method of 'conceptual analysis' that gives philosophy a privileged access to the Truth. One of the conclusions he draws from this is that the division of labour between the philosopher and the historian of ideas no longer makes sense.<sup>3</sup> Another is that philosophy had better consider itself as one voice among others in the ongoing 'Conversation of Mankind', and concern itself with 'finding new, better, more interesting ways of speaking'<sup>4</sup> instead of pursuing eternal truths. This new project is baptized 'edification' to translate the German word *Bildung*; the need for such a term arises from 'substituting the notion of *Bildung* (education, self-formation) for that of "knowledge" as the goal of thinking.'<sup>5</sup>
3. In *Mind and World*, John McDowell criticizes Davidson for the way in which he defines the domain of rationality as a domain *sui generis*. In stating that true beliefs are caused by the physical circumstances, but justified only in terms of other true beliefs, Davidson has effectively made the whole domain of justification, truth, meaning, reason and belief inaccessible: how such a domain should be part of nature, and how knowledge is based on experience, becomes a mystery. Instead of making charitable assumptions, we should understand conceptual content not as opposed to nature but as *second nature*, and the

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<sup>2</sup> *Essays on Actions and Events*, p. 223

<sup>3</sup> *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 272

<sup>4</sup> *idem*, p.360

<sup>5</sup> *idem*, p. 359

emergence of rational behaviour not as an anomaly but as a natural development. The paradigm case for how we become rational beings is the moulding of our ethical character, which is not a network of concepts but a mode of being. 'I cannot think of a good short English expression for this, but it is what figures in German philosophy as *Bildung*.'<sup>6</sup>

Two questions arise naturally from these three remarks. When Davidson talks about a 'constitutive ideal', he is sketching a theory of thought, meaning and action that has 'evolved' further over the decades; but nowhere has he explained what he meant by a 'constitutive ideal', or *how ideals can perform a constitutive role*. The closest counterpart of it that is defined by his theory is the 'principle of charity', which states that the first step in interpretation is to maximize agreement;<sup>7</sup> but this says nothing at all about the role of ideals in reasoning. In a similar vein, when Rorty and McDowell mention the notion of 'Bildung', neither of them bothers to tell more about *how* it figures in German philosophy, or devotes any attention to the possibility that Bildung denotes an *ideal*. The account that they give of Bildung is one of acculturation: for Rorty, it is participating in the Grand Conversation, and for McDowell, initiation into a community. But why do they describe this as *Bildung*? What role did the word perform in German philosophy, that Rorty and McDowell find it appropriate to their own philosophical programmes?

In short, then, the two questions would read:

- Is there a 'constitutive' role for ideals in reasoning?
- What does 'Bildung' mean?

I tried to formulate these two questions as mutually independent as possible, but it is not hard to interpret the latter question as a particular case of the former. If Bildung is an *ideal*, and describes a process by which humans become moral and rational beings, then we have a case of an ideal performing a constitutive role. This might be a confusion: it can be that there is a *process* of Bildung by which human realize their potentials, and an *ideal* about the manner how. But then still the question about the constitutive role of ideals is of consequence for McDowell and Rorty's appeal to Bildung. For McDowell, the appeal to Bildung is a response to the failure that he sees in Davidson's 'coherentism'. Although the 'constitutive ideal' is arguably a crucial element of this coherentism, this does not make McDowell reject it: rather, he picks up the exact phrase to argue for a wider conception of reason. For Rorty, the appeal to Bildung is a consequence of his roughly 'Davidsonian' position; if Davidson would not bother himself with the traditional problems of philosophy, Rorty holds, he would

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<sup>6</sup> *Mind and World*, p. 84

<sup>7</sup> There are several formulations of the Principle of Charity in Davidson's work, none of them satisfactory. In the essays in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, where Davidson propounds the idea that we must start by making a speaker's beliefs as coherent as possible to understand what he means, the principle is *assumed* rather than mentioned; in 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge', 'the principle directs the interpreter to translate or interpret so as to read some of his own standards of truth into the pattern of sentences held true by the speaker'; in 'Three Varieties of Knowledge', it is split up into a Principle of Coherence and a Principle of Correspondence; in 'Expressing Evaluations', it is redefined as a 'policy of rational accommodation'.

arrive at a position in which edification and solidarity take their place. Although ‘rationality’ is not one of Rorty’s favourite words, Rorty’s position is arguably dependent upon a Principle of Charity. For both, their relation to Davidson is crucial in defining their position. So if the ‘constitutive ideal of rationality’ is as important to Davidson’s philosophy as McDowell assumes it to be, then the question about the role of ideals in reasoning is likely to be of consequence for McDowell’s and Rorty’s respective conceptions of Bildung.

In the first part of my thesis, then, I will concern myself with this question and its possible consequences. In investigating Davidson’s conception of reason, and its possible relations to the notion of Bildung, an important role will be given to the philosophy of Wilfrid Sellars, whose theory that all knowledge depends on giving reasons is a common point of reference for Rorty and McDowell, and whom both regard as an important precursor of Davidson. There is little or no mention of the role of ideas in reasoning with any of these authors; but I think that Sellars’ account of how the ‘space of reasons’ is structured provides the most fertile ground for an answer. I do not think, however, that this will lend much support to either Rorty’s or McDowell’s appeal to Bildung; rather, if there is something like a constitutive role for ideals in reasoning, the disregard of Rorty and McDowell for Bildung as an *ideal* will appear as a failure.

So far, these investigations will tell us little about what Bildung means, or how the notion figures in German philosophy. It is not necessary, by any means, that we have a full-fledged theory of the role of ideals before we address this second question. Rather, after preparing ground for the second question by the first, there is good sense in reversing the order, and asking whether the notion of Bildung can count as a ‘constitutive ideal’.

Since the scope of my thesis is limited, and it is philosophy thesis, not an intellectual history thesis, there is a lot that I shall have to leave unanswered. *Bildung*, after all, does not only occur in philosophical debates; the term that McDowell and Rorty adopt is related in its use to the massive conceptual and institutional changes in Germany around 1800, that among other effects produced the modern university and philosophy as an independent discipline. The Bildung revolt – a process that included such diverse developments as the work of Schiller and Goethe, the German reception of Enlightenment thought, the rise of German Idealism, Winckelmann’s art history, the Sturm und Drang and Early Romantic movements, academic reform, and the birth of the nation-state – turned the notion of Bildung into an ideological key concept. This is something that Rorty and McDowell hardly refer to: the notion of Bildung that they use, and borrow from Hans-Georg Gadamer, is one that informs a theory of interpretation. Still, their choice of Bildung as *le mot juste*, for which there are poor equivalents in the English language, suggests the richer sense with all its ideological connotations.

I will follow them in this. In Part II, rather than attempting a partial analysis of a ‘constitutive ideal of Bildung’ in the work of some protagonists of the Bildung revolt, I will analyze some theories of historical interpretation that could assign a ‘role’ or ‘meaning’ to such words as Bildung. The intended

result is a double one: an account of how ideals as key concepts function in intellectual history, and a dissection of the ideals that inform these very theories of interpretation. Investigating these theories, which range over language, history and sometimes art, is an exploration into the border regions of philosophy, history and linguistics.

This analysis, I hope, will put the appeal to *Bildung* in modern analytical philosophy in perspective. First, because neither intellectual history nor theories of interpretation present a veritable 'theory of *Bildung*': what the analysis reveals is a set of dispersed and conflicting uses, and conflicts inherent in its use, rather than a unitary ideal that figures in German philosophy. Second, because Rorty and McDowell themselves are ambivalent, in their relation to the history of ideas, between the 'hermeneutic' idea of an ongoing conversation, and a 'therapeutic' approach to cure us from the history of philosophy. My contention is that neither hermeneutics nor philosophical therapy are successful approaches to the history of ideas, or yield a viable modern conception of *Bildung*. In this thesis, exploring the border regions of philosophy and the role of ideals in reasoning, what I am searching for is just such a conception.

## 2. Davidson's 'Constitutive Ideal'

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What should such a 'modern conception of Bildung' look like? The Davidson-Rorty debate, or the work of the 'Pittsburgh Hegelians' Brandom and McDowell, is by no means representative of modern thought about self-realization and human development. The debates in contemporary analytic philosophy are rarely about such traditional 'Bildung' themes as national character, aesthetic education, history, academic freedom or the unity of the sciences. Davidson may well be the least representative of all in this regard. But these traditional themes are not what is most needed either to understand the Bildung revolt, or to develop a viable conception of Bildung. The main error of Rorty and McDowell, I believe, is that they speak about Bildung as some sort of *given*, something that 'figures' in German philosophy. But merely talking about it in this sense will not 'solve' anything. What is needed, rather, is a theory of how such notions as 'Bildung' function in reasoning, how they are given meaning within a web of beliefs. And *this* is something that Davidson is representative for: no contemporary thinker has devoted more work to the question of what a theory of reason, belief and meaning involves.

It is hard to evaluate the relevance of the phrase 'constitutive ideal of rationality'. It occurs in a relatively early paper, 'Mental Events' (1970); in later work, Davidson prefers to talk about 'norms' and 'standards' of rationality. The phrase seems to mean more to McDowell, who has been quoting it time and again and hinged his discussion of Davidson on it.<sup>8</sup> The argument in which the phrase originally occurred is roughly as follows: with regard to mental events, Davidson defends a position that he calls 'anomalous monism'. Although mental events are events in space and time that have a causal relation to the world, there are no laws to predict them, because it is a condition of such laws that the events covered by them are *homonomic*, must be brought under a common denominator.

The reason for this is that mental events relate to *meanings*. Captain Cook or Gunner Gridley's intention to sink the *Bismarck* may count as a cause that sank the Bismarck, but it depends crucially on their *belief* that the Bismarck is an enemy ship, that torpedoes can sink boats, that pressing a button will fire a torpedo, etc. The beliefs may correspond to electric currents in the brain; but independent of such logical relations they do not classify as *beliefs*. For Davidson, the 'basis of meaning' is that we have a whole set of largely true beliefs about the things about we speak; and these beliefs themselves

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<sup>8</sup> See *Mind and World*, p. 74; 'Functionalism and Anomalous Monism' in *Actions and Events: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, p. 387; and 'The Constitutive Ideal of Rationality: Davidson and Sellars' in *Crítica* 28 (1998)

require articulation and interpretation. Without assuming that some person's beliefs about the world are largely correct, we cannot make sense of what he or she says; without the communicative capacities required to understand the speech of others, we cannot have meaningful *thought*.<sup>9</sup> So the description of mental events involves an element of meaning that is not reducible to physical properties. According to Davidson, the result is that there is no conflict between the principles that 1) mental events have causal intercourse with physical events; 2) where there is causality, there must be a law; and 3) there are no strict deterministic laws on the basis of which mental events can be predicted and explained: 'there may be *true* general statements relating the mental and the physical, statements that have the logical form of a law; but they are not *lawlike*.'<sup>10</sup>

The constitutive ideal of rationality, then, emerges as a methodological assumption. As such, its essence is indeed the principle of charity: 'Charity is a matter of finding enough rationality in those we would understand to make sense of what they say and do, for unless we succeed in this, we cannot identify the contents of their words and thoughts'.<sup>11</sup> But as a methodological assumption, it only tells us something about how reasoning is to be *understood*; it does not yet explain how a theory of meaning, belief and action relates to the actual practice of reasoning. Sure enough, Davidson would say, it is not just the theorist who must make such an assumption: as the thought experiment in 'Radical Interpretation' is supposed to have shown, communication can only succeed if the first step in interpretation is to maximize agreement. Still, the assumption itself does not seem to be part of what is reasoned about. In a bold statement, Davidson puts it this way: 'all thinking creatures subscribe to *my* basic standards or norms of rationality', standards which include, in that formulation, those of decision theory, elementary logic, and inductive reasoning. '[T]hese obvious logical relations amongst beliefs; amongst beliefs, desires and intentions; between beliefs and the world, make beliefs the beliefs they are; therefore they cannot in general lose these relations and remain the same beliefs. Such relations are *constitutive* of propositional attitudes.'<sup>12</sup>

It is hard to see what is *ideal* about these relations, apart from that they are not physical facts. If they are part of everyone's mind set, then the 'standards or norms of rationality' describe what people do anyhow, rather than what they *should* do. Yet it is not the case that everyone knows elementary logic, decision theory, or 'the principle of continence', whatever that may be. People may have similar assumptions and dispositions towards speakers in general (viz. that they have true beliefs about the world, and that their words relate to some state of affairs) but this does not amount to a shared and uniform conception of rationality. So there is a slack between *having* and *explaining* rational capacities, as there is between language use and linguistic theory. The logical relations between mental

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<sup>9</sup> 'Thought and Talk' in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 157

<sup>10</sup> *Essays on Actions and Events*, pp. 208, 216

<sup>11</sup> 'Appendix: Replies to Rorty, Stroud, McDowell and Pereda', in *Truth, Language, and History*, p. 319. This formulation is from a much later Davidson, but it is still written in defence of 'Mental Events', in reply to McDowell's paper 'The Constitutive Ideal of Rationality: Davidson and Sellars'.

<sup>12</sup> 'Incoherence and Irrationality' in: *Problems of Rationality*, pp. 195-6



events may be common to all meaningful thought; but the description of thought in terms of elementary logic etc. remains an ideal description. If this is a correct reading of Davidson, then what he calls the ‘constitutive ideal of rationality’ pertains to a theory *about* reasoning rather than a practice of giving reasons.

Most of Davidson’s conception of rationality can already be found with either Quine or Sellars. For instance, what Davidson calls the ‘holism of the mental’ (the idea that we can only have one belief if we have many, and if the whole of our beliefs is largely correct) finds its counterpart in Quine’s metaphor of a ‘web of beliefs’, in which facts and meanings are so deeply interwoven that they cannot be torn apart. Although they disagree on how these beliefs ‘face the tribunal of experience’, they share the conviction that the truth of expressions is not directly reducible to observation: ‘What comes with the association of sentences with sentences is a vast verbal structure which, primarily as a whole, is multifariously linked to non-verbal stimulation.’<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Davidson’s claim in ‘Thought and Talk’ that ‘a creature must be a member of a speech community if it is to have the concept of belief’<sup>14</sup> neatly summarizes the main argument of Sellars’ *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, where mental events are introduced as ‘theoretical entities’ in a jargon modelled on ‘semantical categories pertaining to overt verbal performances.’<sup>15</sup> All three agree that there is no empirically *given* knowledge: rather, the world *causes* us to have true beliefs, and the truth of these beliefs depends on the whole of our knowledge, not on its cause.

For Richard Rorty, in chapter IV of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Sellars and Quine serve as parental figures that have to be brought together: ‘Each of the two men tends to make continual, unofficial, tacit, heuristic use of the distinctions which the other has transcended.’<sup>16</sup> Quine sticks to a programme of Epistemology Naturalized, as if ‘stimuli’ would provide a better foundation for knowledge than ‘observations’ or ‘sense-data’ – contrary to Sellars’ position that science is rational ‘not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise.’<sup>17</sup> Sellars, on the other hand, devotes a paper to the question ‘Is there a Synthetic *A Priori*?’, concluding that this is indeed a tenable position – indeed, it is crucial to Sellars’ account of meaning and reason that can infer one true sentence from another even when there is no strict deductive rule for it. (Sellars calls this ‘material inference’.) For Rorty, these are the last stirrings of something identifiable as analytic philosophy, some attempt at a rigid method of epistemology or conceptual analysis. Compare this with how Davidson takes stance in ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’:

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<sup>13</sup> *Word and Object*, p. 12

<sup>14</sup> *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 170

<sup>15</sup> *Science, Perception and Reality*, p. 180

<sup>16</sup> *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 171

<sup>17</sup> *Science, Perception and Reality*, p. 170. Quine, for that matter, agrees on that point, and would not be prone to call his naturalized epistemology ‘foundational’; but still he holds that ‘The observation sentence is basic to both [knowing what a sentence means and knowing whether it is true]’. (*Quintessence*, p. 273)

I want to urge that this second dualism of scheme and content, of organizing system and something waiting to be organized, cannot be made intelligible and defensible. It is itself a dogma of empiricism, the third dogma. The third, and perhaps the last, for if we give it up it is not clear that there is anything distinctive left to call empiricism.<sup>18</sup>

I cannot say in how far Rorty and Davidson mean the same thing by ‘analytic philosophy’ and ‘empiricism’. The analogy is relevant mainly because it highlights the point where Davidson gets ‘beyond’ Quine and Sellars.<sup>19</sup>

In ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’, Davidson claims that we cannot make sense of the doctrine of conceptual relativism. No matter the differences between the languages we speak, or the different concepts we use, it cannot be that we are beyond mutual understanding or ‘live in different worlds’. There are, of course, difficulties in understanding, and expressions lacking in certain vocabularies; but still we can assign a truth value to the expressions in a radically different language, because they are not nonsense; and if they are meaningful, then they relate to beliefs that are largely true. It does not make sense to talk of radically different conceptual schemes, because we cannot make sense of the very idea of a ‘conceptual scheme’: the meaning of these mental events and verbal actions does not depend on how they ‘organize’ experience, or ‘represent’ the world.

The idea is then that something is a language, and associated with a conceptual scheme, whether we can translate it or not, if it stands in a certain relation (predicting, organizing, facing, or fitting) [to] experience (nature, reality, sensory promptings). [...]

The trouble is that the notion of fitting to the totality of experience, like the notion of fitting the facts, or of being true to the facts, adds nothing intelligible to the simple concept of being true.<sup>20</sup>

For Davidson, mental events and verbal actions are ‘simply’ things that happen in the world, for which a theory of truth is the most adequate description. We could describe them differently (say, in neurophysiological terms) but that would not get us rid of the notion of truth to make sense of those descriptions. In a Kantian sense, the notion of truth functions as a necessary condition of thought; in a more pedestrian sense, we cannot have a language without metalinguistic expressions like ‘yes’, ‘no’, ‘?’, ‘why’, ‘because’, ‘right’, ‘wrong’. But we do not possess shared and coherent ‘languages’ that produce ‘world views’; a theory of interpretation and translation, as Davidson conceives it, ‘makes no assumptions about shared meanings, concepts, or beliefs’.<sup>21</sup> From this position, it is only a small step to conclude, as Davidson does in ‘A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs’, that ‘there is no such thing as a

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<sup>18</sup> *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 189

<sup>19</sup> Quine, after all, still describes himself as an ‘empiricist’, in a passage from ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’ quoted in ‘On the very Idea’; Sellars is less clear about this in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, but he describes the relation between expressions and the things that cause them as one of ‘picturing’, which characterizes different ‘conceptual schemes’ (*Science and Metaphysics*, chapter V).

<sup>20</sup> *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, pp. 191, 195. The terms between parentheses are all Quine’s.

<sup>21</sup> *idem*, p. 195

language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed.<sup>22</sup>

What room does that leave, then, for a ‘constitutive ideal of rationality’? The net result of Davidson’s rejection of ‘conceptual schemes’ is that there is no ‘conceptual domain’ that must be ‘organized’, no concepts that capture an uninterpreted reality. There is no reason, however, why such conclusions would prohibit the use of the term ‘ideal’, or the development of conceptions of how things should be. For even if notions like reference, correspondence, or representation are no help in accounting for the truth of sentences, still the words have some bearing upon how things are. That Davidson has no theoretical use for such expressions as reference or evidence does not entail that there is no function for them in discussing the relations between sentences. Likewise, that the ‘constitutive ideal of rationality’ is a necessary methodological assumption has little bearing upon the role of ideals within the game of giving and asking for reasons. The recourse to such a methodological assumption does not yet explain the ‘normative character’ of mental vocabulary.

What is this ‘normative character’? The relations between sentences, the argument goes, are defined by the (my) standards and norms of rationality; but of course there is no ‘definite, and short, list of “basic principles”’.<sup>23</sup> It is hard to conceive of them as conventions (how could we *convene* upon the *conditions* of understanding?) or as self-evident ideas; and since people can use them without knowing them by name, it is more plausible to regard them as *generalizations* or *abstractions* from what people do anyhow. (And indeed, people are quite able to reason practically even if they have no skill at solving logical puzzles; which would no be so if they had started from basic principles and then learned how to apply them.) Still, such relations are not perceptible material objects. The standards and norms may be acquired by being brought up in a speech community, but when they are applied in an interpretation for some unfamiliar expression, they are not reflexes but rather part of a conception how things *should* be. Since the skill at cooking up interpretations (‘theories’) is for Davidson the hallmark of rationality, so, I hold, is the capacity to develop such conceptions of how things should be. It is not a simple substitution of *should be* for *are*. When we disagree about something, we do not simply say ‘yes’ and ‘no’ at proposition *p*; we are taking into account the reliability of the evidence and the weight of arguments, the possibility of both deeper disagreement and plain misunderstanding, the importance of the matter, etc. All these considerations involve conceptions of how things should be. When faced with a choice, there is not, in general, a given set of quantified preferences. Rather, the decision-making relies on the imagined outcomes of possible decisions, and which of them would be best. When we hit rock bottom at the end of giving reasons, our typical response according to Wittgenstein is to say, ‘this is just as I do’; but it is also when we fall short of conclusive reasons that deliberation about how things should be is most appropriate. All such conceptions of how things should be do not substitute for descriptions of how things are, but rather complement them. It is

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<sup>22</sup> *Language, Truth, and History*, p. 107

<sup>23</sup> *Problems of Rationality*, p. 196

plausible to claim that such conceptions can only emerge when we already have a sound set of beliefs about how things are; but this does not make them *peripheral*. Rather, I would claim, if the whole of our beliefs is irreducibly *normative*, then so it is laden with conceptions of how things should be.

All these claims about the role of conceptions of how things should be, however, are not Davidson's. I am not sure what he would think of them. For Davidson, the normativity inherent in the description of thought and action presents an anomaly: for part of what we think and do has a propositional character, which is characterized by an indefinable property called 'truth'. And since this truth is neither a cause nor an effect (although 'true beliefs' are), the ascription of truth depends on logical relations that we have no choice but to presuppose. In a Kantian line of argument, these logical relations could count as necessary conditions for knowledge, whereas conceptions of how things should be serve only as guidelines. This would restrict ideals to an auxiliary role, with no bearing upon the formal description of logical relations between sentences. (To complicate matters further, Davidson makes an argument in the same vein about causal explanations: in 'Three Varieties of Knowledge', twenty years after 'Mental Events', he propounds that 'strict laws do not employ causal concepts, while most, if not all, mental concepts are irreducibly causal', because causality is not a physical magnitude, but a concept designed to satisfy some particular explanatory interest.<sup>24</sup>) There are, however, some objections to such an argument. To summarize them beforehand, I do not think that Davidson can present the categorical demands of his theory as 'normative' without them involving conceptions of how things should be. This is why.

First, for Davidson, the truth of sentences depends on other sentences; but no logical grammar or algorithm will yield a description of all these relations. No 'principle of rationality' carries it application on its sleeve. Rather, the relations between sentences depend on some skill that is only gradually made explicit. This skill may have a material basis – which is why Sellars describes it as 'material inference'<sup>25</sup> – but the formulation of these relations is not a generalization over its applications. To formulate such principles is to reject some prior and posterior uses as incorrect.

Second, the learning of language may depend on conditioned responses, but in competent language use it is a rudiment. Competent language use involves a taste for what would be the right thing to say, and a capacity for making novel sentences. Davidson says that the world causes us to have true beliefs, but it does not cause in the same way all these possible expressions, or even a set of protocol sentences on which to modulate. Here we use our imagination; and, with that, conceptions of how things should be. I think it is absurd to attempt a distinction between 'elementary' and 'imaginative' uses of language. Consequently, I think that conceptions of how things should be are an irreducible part of linguistic competence.

The third, and most problematic, objection concerns the idea of 'maximizing agreement'. Arguably,

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<sup>24</sup> *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, p. 216

<sup>25</sup> 'Inference and Meaning' in *Pure Pragmatics and Possible Worlds: The Early Essays of Wilfrid Sellars*. Robert Brandom makes a lot of this notion in his 'inferentialist' theory of language.

some points are more relevant to agree on than others. The state of affairs we are in, and the existence of us both, is more immediately important than our political views, and our cosmology. Some threads, to use Quine's metaphor, are more deeply woven into our web of beliefs than others. I do not think, in accordance with Quine, that our elementary logic is all that indispensable: we could make sense of someone's beliefs held together by different logics, provided we knew how they work. (Why not, since we can understand languages with tenses relative to time, space and epistemic category.) But what about our conceptions of how things should be? Must these also be considered 'veridical', and meet the same standards of consistency as other ideas? These questions are directly linked to the notion of 'constitutive ideals'. For it is one thing to claim that normative standards, rules of proper conduct, discursive commitments, moral principles and social conventions are woven into someone's web of beliefs; it is a further step to assign to them a crucial role in making sense of what people say and do; and still one step further to demand that these conceptions have some consistency among themselves, and that these dispersed 'conceptions of how things should be' make up consistent 'ideals'.

It is this third point that must be pressed further. As indicated, Davidson does not give much of a clue to how these questions should be answered. Richard Rorty, however, has devoted much work to drawing the morals from his 'favourite philosophy of language'<sup>26</sup> (Davidson's) for society, philosophy, the human self-image and related topics. One of these related topics is *Bildung*. Sufficient reason, then, to investigate whether Rorty's appeal to *Bildung* has anything to bear on the above discussion of 'constitutive ideals'.

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<sup>26</sup> *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 138

### 3. Rorty's 'Edification' and the Relation between Norms and Ideals

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Rorty begins *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* with an argument against the mind-body opposition, and ends with a peroration on the ideal of Bildung, or as he calls it, 'edification'. This is not to say that the latter follows from the former. The claim is rather that, since the conception of philosophy as the search for first principles has become outdated, philosophers might just as well contribute to a better world in a more modest way. The argument which gives the book its title, is that philosophy from Descartes and Locke unto the mid-twentieth century has been concerned with giving our knowledge a foundation, with finding criteria that justify our judgements as accurate representations of reality. Even Kant's critique of pure reason, Rorty argues, is kept captive by this image of a 'mirror of nature': for it still pictures empirical knowledge as requiring some ultimate 'foundation' in the structure of the mind. For Rorty, knowledge is part of our interaction with nature rather than a mirror image of it; what causes it is not what justifies it, for justification is a communicative affair, and we are answerable to our fellow human beings, not to first principles or subatomic particles. Descriptions of the structure of the human mind cannot replace this interactive process of reasoning. Now since we do not need the image of a 'mirror of nature' to justify what we think and do, there is no reason to think of the structure of the mind as something very special: we can think of mental vocabulary as just one way among others of dealing with what goes on in the world, without thereby reducing the moral value of human beings. Indeed, it is precisely because of this pragmatism, which refuses to assign a privileged status to mental vocabulary, that Rorty conceives of knowledge as essentially a social affair.

Of course, this 'because' is not as unproblematic as Rorty presents it. In fact, a good quarter of his book is devoted to showing that there is no problem to it. The deconstruction of the 'mirroring' image that forms the core of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is preceded by a thought experiment about 'persons without minds', which purports to show that the whole range of mentalistic expressions are just elements of a particular language game, whose function for sentient creatures could also be performed by descriptions of bodily conditions. This is not to say, according to Rorty, that the 'persons without minds' could also dispense with 'notions like "wanting to" and "intending to" and "believing that" and "feeling terrible" and "feeling marvellous"'. But they had no notion that these signified *mental* states – states of a peculiar and different sort – quite different from "sitting down",

“having a cold” and “being sexually aroused”.<sup>27</sup> The moral that Rorty implicitly draws from Sellars’ ‘Myth of Jones’ is that such notions emerge within a language community as part of the game of giving and asking for reasons. The main difference is that Sellars makes Jones introduce a whole set of theoretical entities, whereas the persons without minds ‘did not explain the difference between persons and non-persons by such notions as “mind”, “spirit”, “consciousness” or anything of the sort. They did not *explain* it at all; they just treated it as the difference between “us” and everything else.’<sup>28</sup>

The thought experiment is not directed against Davidson; still it points to one of the differences of opinion they have been quarrelling on ever since. For Davidson, the normatively structured vocabulary is indispensable; for Rorty, it is optional. In a theory of interpretation, Davidson-style, what the other means, does and believes is grasped as a whole, and this comprehensive theory is itself not merely a product of our prior knowledge, but one of the three varieties of knowledge – subjective, intersubjective, objective – without which the other two would not exist. That is, we only get a grasp of norms by interacting with other people, and without that we get a grasp of nothing whatsoever. This is a process that Davidson calls *triangulating*.<sup>29</sup> Not that Rorty, for whom social interaction is the closest thing to a ‘foundation’ of knowledge, objects against any of this; but for him there is nothing all that ‘anomalous’ to normative jargon. The difference between psychology and biology, he argues, is not any more ‘different’ than that between biology and physics, and if talk of meanings, beliefs and intentions cannot be assimilated to talk of brain-states and locomotor responses, that does not accord to either a privileged status. (For Rorty, questions like ‘do computers think?’ do not mean much unless we might want to give them civil rights.)

But how ‘optional’ are these normative notions, really? Even the persons without minds use *some* normative notions like meaning, belief etc., without really caring what they stand for. In terms that Sellars would use, these people had a partial Jonesian revolution: they started explaining what they did in a jargon modelled on metalanguage, but they did not postulate a set of theoretical entities, again modelled on metalanguage, for the buzz that went on in their heads. This may be somewhat improbable but that’s why it’s a thought experiment. Rorty’s point is that norms belong to the language game, not to the mental domain. Indeed, there are language games with different norms, in which the particular ‘intentional’ notions perform at best a marginal role. (We can buy red apples, or write mathematical tracts, without using words like ‘meaning’ and ‘belief’.) For a Wittgensteinian like Rorty, it must be hard to see how we could have words without norms – but these norms do not depend for their existence on intentional notions. It seems that for Rorty, the normative structure of language use is not all that ‘holistic’: the normative notions that structure part of it, and indeed are used generally to reflect upon language use, are of no consequence for the use of other jargons.

I write ‘it seems’ because Rorty himself does not describe the differences between vocabularies in

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<sup>27</sup> *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 70

<sup>28</sup> *idem*

<sup>29</sup> ‘Three Varieties of Knowledge’ in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*,

terms of different types of normativity, and generally uses ‘normative’ to denote *mentalistic* notions in particular. In several passages in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and elsewhere, fiercely criticized by McDowell in the postscript to *Mind and World*, he explicitly distinguishes between a ‘causal’ and a ‘normative’ description.<sup>30</sup> Taken literally, this distinction is hard to square with his rejection of physicalism and the fact-value distinction. On the one hand, Rorty makes claims like ‘if we could predict mechanically what people would say in the year 3000, we would still not understand them’ and ‘knowing how the mind works does not tell you whether the beliefs it forms are true’; on the other, he claims that it is all a pragmatic decision of which jargon suits your purposes best, and that truth is the same thing in physics and in ethics. For McDowell, such claims are inconsistent: they impose a distinction between an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’ view, while at the same time ruling that there is no ‘outside’ to the human condition. They are not *that* obviously inconsistent, however, if the incommensurability between the various jargons is not regarded as an ontological divide (as Rorty rebukes Kuhn for doing<sup>31</sup>). It is possible that the norms internal to one vocabulary are at odds with those internal to another, so that currents in the cortex do not substitute *salva veritate* for beliefs because it makes no sense to say that currents in the cortex are ‘true’; for Rorty, this means nothing more than that these models don’t mingle. I *do* think that Rorty’s views are inconsistent; but I think they are inconsistent rather with his endorsement of Quine and Davidson’s semantic holism. To make this point will require a small detour from the argument of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

Rorty retains Davidson’s idea that most of our beliefs are true, but he does not support this claim with anything like a constitutive ideal of rationality or a principle of charity. In his reading of Davidson, the notion of truth is useful for an empirical description of how people use words, but this description has no bearing upon the *practice* of justification. In a catch-phrase, ‘there is no connection between justification and truth’.<sup>32</sup> This phrase could be read as the relatively innocent claim that semantics does not fuse with pragmatics, but that is not how Rorty intends it.

What we have learned, principally from Kuhn and from Davidson, is that there is [...] no activity called “knowing” to be discovered [...]. There is simply the practice of justifying beliefs to audiences. None of these audiences is closer to nature, or a better representative of some ahistorical ideal of rationality, than any other. The idea of a subject of study called “rationality” goes at the same time, and for the same reasons, as the idea of a subject of study called “knowledge”.<sup>33</sup>

This sounds like an odd lesson to draw from an author who has assigned a constitutive role to invariant rational principles, and who has submitted a ‘Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge’. It is true

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<sup>30</sup> See in particular, ‘Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth’ in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume I*, and ch. 5 of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. McDowell’s criticism is in the second edition of *Mind and World*, pp. 146-55

<sup>31</sup> *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 324

<sup>32</sup> ‘Truth without Justification’ in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 37

<sup>33</sup> *idem*, p. 36



that Davidson retracted this title following Rorty's criticism, but the fact remains that for Davidson, truth is an integral part of his 'Unified Theory' of thought, meaning and action. For Rorty, there is no such unified theory. Along with the veridical nature of belief, he shares Davidson's assumptions that 'a method of translation is all the theory that is needed'<sup>34</sup> and that 'there is nothing for true sentences to correspond to'<sup>35</sup> – but he does not concur with the claim that 'without the idea of truth we would not be thinking creatures, nor would we understand what it is for someone else to be a thinking creature.'<sup>36</sup> Without that, the claim that most of our beliefs must be true for any of them to be true loses its main argument, and most of its content. For it is hard to see how the truth of one belief can be warranted by its dependence on the whole of our beliefs, if these beliefs are given vent in incommensurable jargons. If the notion of truth is merely convenient for describing the relations between expressions in a language we know, but not crucial for their being made and understood, then these relations between expressions are not compelling: although the description of these relations makes the ascription of beliefs depend on a larger set of beliefs, it does not lend support to the claim of overall coherence. So Rorty appears to be arguing that if an expression is valid in a functioning language game, that is enough.

With regard to how we understand what people say and do, this is a sound pragmatic claim. To give some of Rorty's own examples, there is nothing that stops an evolutionary biologist from going to church, Heidegger was a cowardly hypocrite and a Nazi as well as a great philosopher, and Rorty's own political convictions have no consequences for his passion for spotting wild orchids. Indeed, to take the simplest case, we can understand his political convictions without the wild orchids. But such examples leave a problem unaddressed about the separation between justification and truth. For if these practices provide enough *justification* to our beliefs, that does not make them *true* according to Rorty's standards – and still we are somehow caused to have largely true beliefs. However, when this truth is not warranted by overall coherence, it is hard to construct an argument that makes it depend upon the structure of particular language games instead. Although Rorty is prone to extend Davidson's conclusion that 'language does not exist' with 'there are only language games', he does not attempt to construct a theory for Truth in language game  $G_L$  instead of Truth in language  $L$ . (This would be a theory of truth for a more limited domain; but since language games interlock and share a good deal of everyday expressions, the limits would be impossible to draw, or at least arbitrary enough to make the theory unwieldy. Besides, such a theory would not fit the model of radical interpretation, because it presupposes familiarity with the language game.) The lesson that Rorty draws specifically from combining Kuhn with Davidson is that although some language-games are incommensurable, all expressions are translatable. This, I suppose, is what he finds truth 'convenient' for. But without

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<sup>34</sup> 'Radical Interpretation' in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 129. Compare 'Pragmatism, Davidson, and Truth', Part III.

<sup>35</sup> 'Epistemology and Truth' in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, p. 183

<sup>36</sup> 'Truth Rehabilitated' in Brandom (ed.), *Rorty and his Critics*, p. 72

general coherence among our beliefs, this is begging the question.

This is not quite a knock-down argument against Rorty's philosophy of language. It rather confirms that from his own position, there are more important things than truth. Still, the theoretical argument above is relevant here because it reflects upon Rorty's notion of 'edification'. One obvious negative result is that edification cannot be described as a constitutive ideal in a Davidsonian sense; for that would require coherentism. It is not quite that obvious whether edification provides a viable alternative. Rorty suggests that we should substitute '*Bildung* for knowledge as the goal of thinking', but it is an open question whether his pluralism about language games allows for such an encompassing ideal, and indeed whether it is of any consequence at all.

The argument that connects Rorty's critique of theories of knowledge with his appeal to *Bildung*, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, is that we should not attempt to bring all language games under one epistemological denominator, but rather appreciate them by their own right. In a quite literal sense, we have to start a conversation. This means that, although we have nothing better than our own standards and assumptions to start from, they may have to be abandoned in the course of conversation; they may not apply in the other game after all, and sometimes we even accommodate our own game. One consequence of this 'hermeneutic' approach is that, in the course of understanding others, we also create ourselves anew: we learn to express ourselves in different ways, and re-value the values of our own community. In drawing this consequence, Rorty relies heavily upon Gadamer, from whom he derives both this use of the term 'hermeneutics' and the project of substituting '*Bildung* for knowledge as the goal of thinking'.

Not that Rorty has anything against knowledge. To a great extent, pursuing a hermeneutic understanding *is* gathering knowledge; and likewise, getting to understand natural phenomena for which we do not have a solid scientific model is also a type of hermeneutics. '[O]bjective inquiry is perfectly possible and frequently actual – the only thing to be said against it is that it provides only some, among many, ways of describing ourselves, and that some of these can hinder the process of edification.'<sup>37</sup> As he reads it in Gadamer, there is nothing like a hermeneutic *method* to replace epistemology, but there are familiar and less familiar things, and hermeneutics roughly stands for what we do not have a method for. We can be 'epistemological' about the more familiar things if we please. Hermeneutics is Rorty's way of being a pluralist and a holist at the same time. It is holist with regard to language games in that it regards the language game as a whole; holist with regard to the interpreter in that it addresses not a particular type of cognition, but the whole person; and even more holist in that it brings to notice the historical contingency of one's understanding, and so makes this understanding part of an ongoing historical conversation. What is pluralist about this all-encompassing view of history – Gadamer calls it a 'Wahrheitsgeschehen', Rorty speaks of 'the Conversation of

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<sup>37</sup> *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 361

Mankind' – is that there is no privileged position in it: every voice has a right to be heard. In this open conversation, however, there is little space for the traditional concern of philosophy with 'fundamental problems': no 'method' of systematic reflection or conceptual analysis will make this concern more important than others. That, in itself, is not sufficient reason to give it up; but without overall coherence among beliefs there is little of which they can be 'fundamental', and assuming that analysis and reflection depend on historically contingent language games, what goes on in philosophy is not different in type from what goes on in the history of ideas. The consequences for what philosophers do, however, are not entirely negative. In effect, Rorty advocates two things: *philosophical therapy* to cure us from the delusions of the 'Mirror of Nature', and *thinking with history* to keep the conversation going. Rorty does not draw a distinction in these terms; still, they are good labels for the more pluralist and the more holist parts of his project. Is there a conflict between the two? I think there is indeed. But it is not between regarding ideas as historically contingent, and treating them as inherited delusions. The conflict is between regarding language-games as self-sufficient, and including them in an all-encompassing hermeneutic conversation. To show that these two are at odds, a little more prodding into the relation between norms and ideals is needed.

It is grossly unclear what it takes for something to classify as a 'norm'. There is no obvious way to identify norms with actions, beliefs or objects. Rather, there are things that pass as 'normal' in each language game without which the game would 'lose its point'; viz. that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , that the weight of the cheese determines its price, and that the wine I order is served in a glass on the table and not poured out over my neck. Some of these 'norms' are regularities that pass without notice; others involve more or less explicit standards of correctness. As Robert Brandom has argued, they cannot be *mere* regularities, unless a falling stone is to count as performing 'rule-following behaviour' in falling. But they cannot be purely conventional either, not in the strong sense of *being agreed upon*, because that would make us agree upon the basis of agreement, and presupposes the kind of understanding that norms should establish; nor in the weaker sense of being *tacitly assumed*, for that would require some tacit agreement, and the assumption that this tacit agreement exist cannot be justified in terms of still more tacit agreements *ad infinitum*. Without a naturalistic basis, there is little sense to the notion of norms; but equally, there is little *use* to them outside what Sellars calls the 'space of reasons'.

Rorty links the concept of the 'space of reasons' directly to his own conception of Bildung-as-conversation: following 'Sellars' doctrine that "in characterizing an episode or a state as *knowing*... we are placing it in the logical space of reasons", leads him to see 'knowing as not having an essence, [but] *conversation* as the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood.'<sup>38</sup> But such a conversation involves that one language game is to be of consequence for others. This in itself is not at odds with their being, to some extent, incommensurable; after all, actions that follow different rules

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<sup>38</sup> idem, p. 389

can still affect one another. The problem is, how are the limits of a language game to be drawn? There is no set of rules and conventions that defines them exhaustively. Nor is there a strict limit to what would count as a 'valid reason'. Rorty's own notion of edification entails that norms cannot be treated as given, but rather are continuously at stake. Not that there is an obvious way in which one type of knowledge can be made relevant in a different language game. (If you know Greek you still got to pay for your cheese.) But if there is to be a conversation at all, and if meaning is relative to language games, then the conversation involves an act of translation that necessarily puts alien expressions within a familiar space of reasons. Rejecting the fact/value-distinction, moreover, makes translation itself an act of making relevant.

Rorty's conversational metaphors make it appear as if there is some wider context within which our beliefs and actions are given meaning. But this context is not quite 'given', any more than the rules within a language game are. Putting beliefs and actions in a 'wider context' does not make them any more relevant or justified, if this wider context consists of different, self-sufficient language games. What matters for the practice of giving and asking for reasons is not that there are other language games being played, but how they affect our conceptions of *how things should be*.

This claim comes close to being 'idealistic' about norms. But that is not my point. A conception of how things should be that bears no relation to reality is of no consequence at all. It is inevitable to think of norms to some extent as *ideal constructs*, instead of mere regularities, if the game of giving and asking for reasons is to be anything more than a stimulus-response game. A great deal of what passes without notice as 'normal' is cultural rather than natural. This does not mean that social reality is not 'real', but that it could be *different*. That is precisely what Rorty's notion of edification points at. Now if things could be different, not in theory but in fact, then giving reasons for how things are is arguing about how they *should be*. Giving reasons, then, is a *creative* practice: both in the *imaginative* sense of developing new conceptions, and in the *constructive* sense of making them relevant.

Emphasizing the role of ideals as a *creative* element in reasoning is not the same as attributing to them a *constitutive* role. The claim that they must be developed instead of assumed runs counter to Davidson's account of the 'constitutive ideal of rationality', which states universal prior conditions to understanding. But must ideals state universal prior conditions in order to perform a constitutive role? It seems to me, for instance, that Davidson's theory of interpretation can do very well without assigning a sort of transcendental status to decision theory, elementary logic, and inductive reasoning. It is sound enough to assume that someone's beliefs are largely true and interrelated; but although it is unlikely that we will ever chance upon a tribe of intuitionists, Quine has a point in suggesting that logics without the law of the excluded third may turn out to be more adequate to quantum physics. In general, presenting ideals as a creative element in reasoning runs counter to the assumption that some ideals are fixed and shared. My claim, accordingly, is that a constitutive role must be attributed to ideals in general, rather than to some particular ideal. In so far as the standards of reasoning are ideals that our actions must meet, they can be argued about and replaced. But reasoning cannot proceed

without ideals whatsoever. It is not as if we have ideals when we run out of norms. Rather, it is to the extent that the notion of norms belongs to the space of reasons that they are made explicit as conceptions of how things should be.

Conceptions of how things should be can be mere fancies. This is why it makes sense to demand (as I did in the previous chapter) that they must have some consistency among themselves to make up consistent 'ideals'. But what would be a good test of consistency? It is not enough to demand that they contain no contradictory elements, for it is easy enough to dream up logically consistent utopias that are neither useful nor convincing. Without constraints upon the imagination, granting a role to ideals in reasoning threatens to reduce reason to fancy.

This risk is averted, however, by taking into account how norms figure in the space of reasons. The very fact that there are *so many* of them, many of which pass without notice, makes finding some consistency among them already a hazardous affair. Since they regulate practices in which one action requires and anticipates many others, it is safe enough to assume that norms in general are strongly interdependent. But interdependent is not the same as consistent. Since the sphere of reasons has its own norms – *consistency* among others – making them explicit in the space of reasons is *bringing them to reason*. Within a social environment, ideals are neither given beforehand nor products of wishful thinking. It is a mistake, I think, to assume that there *is* a social environment within which they *emerge*. There are no such 'given' contexts: the social environment itself does not exist prior to the ideal constructions. Equally, what makes norms 'normative' is making them explicit, arguing about them, bringing them to reason. The role of ideals in reasoning, in this regard, is making things more real rather than dreaming away from them. In arguing about how things should be, we are developing ever more inclusive conceptions of reality, creating coherency among our beliefs and actions. (Unlike Davidson, I do not take coherency for granted. It must be achieved.)

My misgivings about Rorty on language games are that he is indeed treating norms and contexts as given, a substitute foundationalism after all. There is no need to make too much of either norms or contexts: the plain fact that we cannot do away with all norms in one fell swoop is reason enough not to treat them as mere fancies, and 'seeing things in context' does not solve all our problems. If Rorty really wants to get rid of the Myth of the Given, then he should not rely on substitute Givens like norms, language games, contexts, all-encompassing hermeneutic conversations, or the 'historicity of understanding'. Taking into account the role of ideals in reasoning yields a different picture, in which there are neither secure self-sufficient domains nor encompassing wholes. The problem with Rorty's 'edification' is that, under the assumption that we are continually entailed in the larger 'Conversation of Man', it becomes a synonym to *acculturation*.<sup>39</sup> There is nothing compelling about it except social pressure. This changes when the notion of culture is not taken for granted, but regarded as one more

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<sup>39</sup> Compare Gadamer's conclusion to *Wahrheit und Methode*, to which Rorty's idea of 'philosophy and the Conversation of Man' is indebted: 'Wir sind als Verstehende in ein Wahrheitsgeschehen einbezogen und kommen gleichsam zu spät, wenn wir wissen wollen, was wir glauben sollen.' (4th edition, p. 465)

ideal construct: then there is not a secure 'social environment' or 'historical background', but rather a lot of stuff that goes on because it is reasoned and argued about. In a more dramatic phrase, it is a field of continuous conflict.

It is possible, from this perspective, to describe culture as an ongoing conversation, even an 'hermeneutic' one; but to leave it at *that* would be fancy indeed. That would be to disconnect conversation from action, and to perceive the conflicts within a cultural environment as merely conversational. Metaphors about the 'ongoing Conversation of Mankind' hide from sight that arguing for a certain conception is also *doing* something, that it is part of a person's action, belief and decision-making.<sup>40</sup> Although such acts of reasoning transcend the boundaries of language games (for else we would have only very limited conceptions), that does not detach them from the world. To sum up, then, I do not think that the role of ideals in reasoning is adequately described in terms of either language games or hermeneutic conversations; and accordingly, I do not think that Rorty's combination of philosophical therapy and thinking with history yields a fertile strategy. But since this conclusion does not prove it to be internally inconsistent, that is not the last word on it.

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<sup>40</sup> Quentin Skinner perceives this as an argument for 'seeing them in context' rather than regarding them as expressions of historically developing ideas. More about that later.

## 4. McDowell's 'Second Nature'

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I am not defending idealism in a German sense. Still, the argument that ideals are not fancies because they are essential to social reality can be an argument that social reality itself is a fancy. This would be a reproach in line with John McDowell's critique of Davidsonian 'coherentism', and his attempt to 'reconcile reason and nature' through the claim that 'The world itself must exert a rational constraint on our thinking.'<sup>41</sup>

Remarkably enough, McDowell goes at pains to ward off the charge of 'rampant Platonism' with an appeal to Bildung-as-acculturation not unlike Rorty's. Like Rorty, he is urging his readers to abandon the traditional concerns of philosophy for a Wittgensteinian brand of philosophical therapy, together with a notion of Bildung borrowed from philosophical tradition. Although McDowell is critical of Rorty as a follower of Davidson, he insists that the 'reconciliation of reason and nature' he recommends could be represented as a pragmatism in Rorty's sense.<sup>42</sup> What he is attacking in Davidson and Rorty is not only that their conception of reason and justification is 'free spinning', but also that it is complemented by a 'disenchanted' conception of nature. Instead, he recommends, we should see reason as 'second nature', and 're-enchant' nature. From my position with regard to reasoning and ideals, the obvious question is what the role of ideals is in McDowell's attempt to reconcile reason and nature. (And also, entailed in that question, whether it is at odds with my claims in the previous chapter, and what the consequences are.) This, then, is what I will investigate in the following chapter.

A second, less obvious, question is what to think of his attempt to combine philosophical therapy and thinking with history. Unlike Rorty, McDowell does not describe Bildung in terms of conversation, but he does describe it as initiation into something that is going on over a long span of cultural development, 'a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what.'<sup>43</sup> 'Reason' figures in McDowell's writings both as a culturally defined capacity and as the capacity to think beyond one's own predicament. This is one way of 'thinking with history'; another is that, although the reconciliation of reason and nature must 'give philosophy peace', reason is largely defined in Kantian and Aristotelian terms. Both ways of thinking – within a cultural, and a philosophical tradition – are combined in McDowell's notion of Bildung. Bildung, then, is made to achieve something

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<sup>41</sup> *Mind and World*, p. 42

<sup>42</sup> *idem*, pp. 146-55

<sup>43</sup> *idem*, p. 126

amazing: it combines rational autonomy, cultural tradition, the history of philosophy *and* its destruction. If this is a viable idea or ideal, it is not quite ‘what figures in German philosophy as *Bildung*’!

McDowell uses Davidson’s phrase ‘constitutive ideal of rationality’ much more pertinently than Davidson himself. To McDowell, it presents an alternative to both ‘bald naturalism’ and ‘rampant Platonism’: for him, the constitutive ideal of rationality is a way of seeing the relation between mind and world as unproblematic. That is, he does not use it to defend a doctrine of anomalous monism: the idea that the mental or conceptual domain is an anomaly is precisely what McDowell rejects in Davidson. The problem with that doctrine is that it makes the relation between mind and world mysterious after all. Davidson (and Rorty, and Sellars) supposes that experience somehow ‘causes’ us to have beliefs without justifying them – for beliefs are justified only by other beliefs. Against this, McDowell brings in a Wittgenstein quote: ‘When we say, and *mean*, that such-and-such is the case, we – and our meaning – do not stop anywhere short of the fact; but we mean: *this-is-so*.’<sup>44</sup> Our beliefs are about the world, not about our beliefs about the world.

Then how are things to supply us with reasons for beliefs? In *Mind and World*, McDowell makes a very complicated argument about the role of Kantian spontaneity in experience and concepts belonging to the realm of Fregean sense. I doubt if anyone has ever been convinced by this. A better clue is given in his essay about ‘Putnam on Mind and Meaning’: there he comments upon Putnam’s phrase that ‘meanings just ain’t in the head’ that this is so not because experts know better what a name stands for, but because *mind* is not in the head.<sup>45</sup> Thinking is something that goes on in a social environment, of which the things we talk about are also part. (Here again, compare Wittgenstein’s claim that knowing is not a mental state.) This is why we must treat the objects we talk about as *real things*, not as bodies of connected particles, or strings of subatomic foldspace woven into space-time; and this is also why he rejects Putnam’s and Sellars’s scientism.<sup>46</sup> But since the world of which these objects are part is one into which we are initiated, which we ‘come to have’ as we acquire a language, this reality is ‘fraught with ought’: there is no strict separation between how we should think about things and how things are.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> idem, p. 27; the original, *Philosophische Untersuchungen* § 95, reads: ‘Wenn wir sagen, *meinen*, daß es sich so und so verhält, so halten wir mit dem, was wir meinen, nicht irgendwo vor der Tatsache: sondern meinen, daß *das und das – so und so – ist*. – Man kann aber dieses Paradox (welches ja die form einer Selbstverständlichkeit hat) auch so ausdrücken: Man kann *denken*, was nicht der Fall ist.’

<sup>45</sup> *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality*, pp. 275-91; the phrase is on almost every page.

<sup>46</sup> See the Woodbridge Lectures, ‘Having the World in View: Sellars, Kant and Intentionality’ in: *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. XCV (1998), no. 9, pp. 431-91, in particular p. 468ff., where he attacks Sellars for saying that ‘*speaking as a philosopher*, I am quite prepared to admit that the common-sense world of physical objects in Space and Time is unreal – that is, that there are no such things’.

<sup>47</sup> I have had some correspondence with McDowell on this topic. He objected to my description of ideals as conceptions of how things should be: ‘I think the relevant “oughts” apply to our thinking. The question addressed by ideals such as consistency is how we should think, not how things should be. But how we should think about how things are isn’t separable from how things are.’ I felt this was a contradiction and wrote so. That



From McDowell's perspective, then, the world exerts a rational constraint upon our thinking because it is *our* world, because the things that bring about experiences are also things that we can conceive of. Reality is not a force from outside. On this point, McDowell follows Davidson's rejection of the very idea of a conceptual scheme; but his main objection against Davidson and co. is that it is of no consequence for them whether the things you talk about really exist. For McDowell, causal restraint and overall coherence are not enough, precisely because this 'coherentism' leaves the relation between mind and world mysterious. To see that there is no mystery, you have to take the world you have as real, *and* as conceptually structured. Within the world of *Mind and World*, there is no causal substructure to experience that does not involve concepts.

But this begs the question. *Where do we get those concepts?* Throw in another phrase from Wittgenstein, say that they are part of our form of life, but that does not make them any less mysterious. Say that they come together with learning a language, and then you have a conceptual scheme once again, because they 'have the world in view'. Regarding concepts as an integral part of reality, instead of something imposed on it, does not change that. For despite his 'Hegelianism', and his programme for 're-enchanting the world', McDowell continues to distinguish rational relations from causal relations. Does this mean that there remains a 'nomological slack'? I think so. In a world in which there is no strict separation between how things are and how we should think, it makes sense to say that causal relations are relative to some specific explanatory interest; but this is the position that Davidson himself develops later in his work, and it does not make him abandon anomalous monism. The main difference between Davidson and McDowell, in this respect, is that for McDowell the whole world exists relative to some explanatory interest – in the sense that a 'world' is what we 'have in view'. That may make him more of a realist with regard to causal relations, but it does not explain where we get our concepts, including causality.

McDowell's view of second nature is an inside view. We can also view things the other way – for instance, one physicist in the science pages of my newspaper claims that man is doing what nature has been doing all the time – trying out new tricks – only a lot faster, smarter, and with more fantasy.<sup>48</sup> A similar thing could have been written by McDowell, in so far as he emphasizes the naturalness of second nature. But he seems to want to have his cake and eat it; for in the last lecture of *Mind and World*, he emphasizes at once *that* and the categorical difference between rational and other animals. His point is that reason is not merely a superstructure imposed on animal experience, for that would mean that something in experience is preconceptually Given – so the *world* of free rational human beings must be incomparably different from the *environment* in which other animals live. The fact that we have concepts makes that we can freely deliberate about what to do and what to think, and the fact that we are brought up in a speech community with a cultural tradition makes us perceive things as meaningful, normal, good or bad, rationally related, and so on. There is nothing mysterious about this,

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ended our correspondence.

<sup>48</sup> Robbert Dijkgraaf in NRC Handelsblad, 14-10-2006, p. 46

McDowell says, if we view it as a natural process of *Bildung*. Now if there is *nothing mysterious* about our initiation into second nature, how can there be such an *incomparable difference*? The fact that my grandmother spoke language does not explain to me how I learned language. Certainly, people have been bringing up their children for ages without performing a philosophical magic trick in the process, but that only shows we do not need philosophy to do the trick, not that we really understand what is going on. McDowell seems to be saying that we do not need such a theoretical understanding, that the desire for such an understanding is a ‘philosophical anxiety’ that we must be cured of. But that would leave us with the same old ‘nomological slack’.

McDowell does not describe *Bildung* as a ‘constitutive ideal’, although he holds that ‘To reassure ourselves that our responsiveness to reasons is not supernatural, we should dwell on the thought that our lives are shaped by spontaneity, patterned in ways that come into view only within an enquiry framed by what Davidson calls a “constitutive ideal of rationality”’.<sup>49</sup> Davidson, however, needs to posit the constitutive ideal because his theory of interpretation does not rely on a shared language, or on rational constraints from outside. McDowell has no need of that, because he believes that ‘the dictates of reason are there anyway, whether or not one’s eyes are opened to them’<sup>50</sup> – and what opens our eyes to them is ‘initiation into a shared language’!<sup>51</sup> As for the role that ideals play in this theory, McDowell gives no further clues than to describe his position as ‘naturalized Platonism’. This is one more way of saying that the sphere of reasons is man’s natural environment; it does not make a point about the role of ideals in reasoning.

There *is* something ideal about the programme for ‘re-enchanting nature’. It is McDowell’s ideal that we should liberate ourselves from philosophical anxieties about the relation between Mind and World. I fail to see, however, what is so attractive about this ideal. McDowell is telling us that the standards of reasoning – what Davidson relates to a ‘constitutive ideal’ – emerge in the cultural tradition of a speech community, and that ‘a standing obligation to engage in critical reflection is itself part of the inheritance’<sup>52</sup>. So we may put everything, even the standards of rationality, into question, but we should not go waxing philosophical about it. Worse, the whole programme for ‘re-enchanting’ the world is about thinking differently, not about changing the world. Conceptions of how things should be, in McDowell’s programme, matter only in so far as they apply to our thinking.<sup>53</sup> This is really quite strange if you also compare the emergence of concepts to the moulding of the ethical character. Consider the following example. *Politeness* is perhaps one of the most universal ‘dictates of reason’: in every social environment, some acts and words count as polite, whereas others count as rude or ridiculous. These language games exist independently of what I think of them; in that sense they ‘are

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<sup>49</sup> *Mind and World*, p. 78

<sup>50</sup> *idem*, p. 91

<sup>51</sup> *idem*, p. 186

<sup>52</sup> *idem*, p. 126

<sup>53</sup> See footnote 48 above.

there anyway'. But no amount of teaching will tell me, for each particular situation, whether someone is really wishing me well, being coldly polite, or even poking fun at me. I have the concept of politeness because I grew up in a social environment; but do other people have the *same* concept? I will be likely to use some phrases as a matter of personal preference; but the problem is not merely *that*. If we had a shared concept of politeness, we would be able to recognize an expression as polite independent of personal preference. The point of learned rules and conventions, however, is not that they tell me for every situation what expression or act is appropriate, but rather that they allow me to construct a 'passing theory' of what would be appropriate. Strictly speaking, the learned rules and conventions do not *determine* what is polite – one can also be coldly polite, or insincere, without violating any social code. Disagreement about someone's being polite or not does not stop somewhere at questions of how to apply shared standards in particular cases; but still we are able to argue sensibly about it. Such arguments are an integral part of the practice of polite conduct, and it is quite 'natural' that we are uneasy with them, for nothing we learned will give us the last say. No amount of philosophical therapy will get us rid of that anxiety.

This is a case similar to that of interpreting malapropisms in Davidson's 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs'. There, Davidson argued that learned rules and conventions do not explain how we understand someone meaning 'alligators' when talking about 'allegories' on the banks of the Nile – and still, such interpretations are quite natural, because people are making slips of the tongue, using words inappropriately or idiosyncratically, introducing unfamiliar expressions, and constructing ill-formed sentences all the time. Comparing this capacity for understanding to the 'moulding of the ethical character' is useful here for bringing out how this capacity involves conceptions of how things should be. Recognizing 'correct usage' and 'polite conduct' is part of our way of life, and it is reasonable to expect that other people have this capacity too. Still, not all cases of incorrectness or impoliteness count as 'irrational' – only gibberish and sociopath or autistic behaviour does. Making sense of them is indispensable to social conduct. Conceptions of correctness and politeness, that have become second nature to members of a speech community, get their content from this making sense of other people rather than from being learned and shared. Still, these conceptions perform a crucial role; in that sense, they are examples of 'constitutive ideals'.

The notion of 'second nature' brings these ideals to the ground. I do not think that McDowell's notion of second nature is any more successful than Davidson's anomalous monism at explaining where we get our concepts, but it is a solid alternative in so far as it elaborates upon Davidson's rejection of the very idea of a conceptual scheme. Unfortunately, McDowell lets in the dualism between scheme and content through the back door by making the 'world' relative to a speech community, and arguing that our concepts 'have the world in view'. The problem, I think, is not in the idea that reason is embedded in an environment but in McDowell's urge that we should be cured of philosophy. Instead of curing ourselves of philosophy, we had better get cured of that urge.

## 5. Thinking with History

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By presenting the conceptually structured world as our ‘natural environment’, McDowell makes it appear as if our concepts have an accomplished nature. I do not believe this is so: that is why I lay so much emphasis on the role of ideals in reasoning. It is important to realize that conceptions of how things should be are rooted in what people do and have been doing, but this does not prevent them from being essentially contested concepts. To view the sphere of reasons like this has implications for the relation of present thought to the history of ideas, and so for what I described as ‘thinking with history’ in Rorty and McDowell.

Quentin Skinner, in his essay ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas’, attacks two ‘mythologies’ which he finds at work in conventional history of ideas, the *mythology of doctrine* and the *mythology of coherence*. The former tells us that there are such things as ideas which develop in the course of history, the latter that texts are unities in which a coherent presentation of such ideas as attempted. According to Skinner, these tacit assumptions lead to the ascription of impossible intentions to authors (how can Petrarca have intended to ‘start the Renaissance’?) and to completely inappropriate criticism (Petrarca’s notion of the Renaissance is ‘undeveloped’). What historians should focus on, is *what an author was doing in writing a particular text*; and so it is crucial to realize that ideas have agents, that they do not exist on their own, that there is only ‘a variety of statements made by a variety of different agents with a variety of intentions.’<sup>54</sup> So it is methodologically unsound to seek for eternally valuable answers to eternal questions: instead, Skinner argues, ‘we must learn to do our thinking for ourselves’.<sup>55</sup>

Skinner’s attack can be turned against McDowell and Davidson. McDowell believes in a notion *Bildung* that develops in the course of history, figures in German philosophy, and is latent in Aristotle; you can call that a mythology of doctrine. Davidson postulates that we must impose our own standards of rationality to make the speaker maximally coherent; call that a mythology of coherence. This is more or less my own argument in the above. Still, Skinner’s argument that ideas are part of what people do is not in itself an argument against McDowell and Davidson - it is a premise they all share. But Skinner is not particularly concerned with questions of truth and semantics. A statement, Skinner

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<sup>54</sup> ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas’, in: James Tully (ed.), *Meaning and Context. Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, Princeton UP, 1988, p. 56

<sup>55</sup> *idem*, p. 66. I have discussed Skinner’s views in some detail in my paper ‘New Meanings in the History of Ideas’; this chapter essentially follows the argument from that paper.

claims, is a social action, and its meaning is a social meaning; his concern is to explain what motivated a statement, and what effects it could have. This is something that Skinner needs no overall coherence or grand conversation for.

What Skinner leaves out of regard, however, is that such social meanings are part of a game of giving and asking for reasons, and that the historical explanation of them is a practice of reason-giving as well. Explaining Machiavelli's or Hobbes's intentions is giving reasons for what may have counted as reasons for them. Now although it is possible to give interpretations while suspending judgement, I do not think the two types of reasoning are strictly separable. Even when interpreting a statement that one does not find plausible, the reasons for the interpretation generally make the statement more plausible than it was at first sight. (For instance, explaining why someone could have held such a seemingly stupid or absurd idea.) Historical interpretation, in this way, becomes a way of *thinking with history*.

What is the relevance of this 'thinking with history' for the question of whether there are 'constitutive ideals'? In chapter 3, I emphasized the role of ideals as a *creative element* in reasoning. But I also pointed out that in order to be of consequence, ideals must have some relation to the norms that structure practices: they 'bring them to reason'. In the history of thought, ideals do not emerge out of the blue as readymade ideologies, but rather as ill-formed inarticulate conceptions of how things should be. Making such conceptions coherent is something that, among others, philosophers do; and historians of ideas, in reasoning along with past conceptions, do a similar thing. The attempt to find reasons for what people did and said is a creative work in its own right; even an attempt to explain the follies of the past is a contribution to conceptions of how things should be, to the extent that clarifying the thought of others is also a matter of developing new conceptions. Rorty is right in saying that there is no strict separation between the work of philosophers and historians of ideas. There is a pragmatic division of labour that both parties are quite happy with, but both are subjecting conceptions of how things should be to critical scrutiny.

More generally, this is what people continually do in making sense of each other. Whenever people are playing the game of giving and asking for reasons, they are a bit like jungle linguists: nothing they know or have learned will put beyond question whether the things they think and do are really as it should be. No wonder people get anxious about such games, and end them by saying, 'this is just as I do'. Such responses are not straightforwardly 'irrational'. But they fail to take into account how deeply what people do is embedded in norms and meanings. Finding one's way in the world is a matter of continually attributing meanings, making decisions, constructing 'passing theories'. Such attributions, decisions and constructions are like the more theoretical work of philosophers and historians in that they must be argued for, that they involve ideals as well as knowledge about the world.

From Rorty's perspective, the merit of what philosophers and historians do is contributing to our *Bildung*: with more elaborate ideas, we can be a more interesting voice in the conversation. It is not an

indispensable contribution: the game can go on without it. Now Rorty has a point there: people with no knowledge of philosophy or the history of ideas can also give and ask for reasons, and reason does not govern the course of history. Still, the fact that the game goes on does not make it meaningful. To be understood as meaningful, Davidson claims, a statement must cohere with a mass of largely true beliefs. The question is: *do ideals contribute to this understanding, and to the coherence of beliefs?*

Even if you hold that the domain of beliefs, understanding etc. is normatively structured, and that these norms themselves are made articulate in the elaboration of ideals, this point is not obvious. In chapter 2, I pointed out that what Davidson calls a ‘constitutive ideal of rationality’ pertains to a theory *about* reasoning rather than a practice of giving reasons. Still, it would be a strange thing to claim that such a theory would be outside the practice of giving reasons. The theory is something that must be argued for; and it is meant as a description of what people do all the time when they make sense of other people. The theory itself is a sort of ideal description: it aims to improve our understanding of what people do in describing what interpretation should be like. One can be rational without knowing Davidson, but if the theory is sound, then his reasoning will be improved by it.

What does this tell us about other ideals? We may assume, if we want to make sense of them, that other people have somewhat coherent beliefs, but there is no way to tell precisely to what extent. (There is no standard measure of coherence and belief to define the limit beneath which everything deteriorates into nonsense.) One thing is certain: our knowledge is incomplete. As individuals, we know only a wee little bit of what there is to know, and yet to discover. Moreover, the great bulk of what we know is in the depths of our memory, and if it all coheres, we know so from practice rather than from introspection. Still, although we have to make guesses in decision-making, we are not continually at loss: on basis of what we know, we form preconceptions of what to expect, of how to fit in new knowledge, and where to search for it.

Such preconceptions are ideal constructions; they are not full-fledged ideals. But we must somehow translate knowledge into decision-making, even where it is inconclusive. The standard approach in decision theory is to make calculated guesses weighing preference for possible outcomes against their probability. This is okay if you know what you want. But what people want is not independent from what they know. It is not as if they have unambiguous preferences and insufficient knowledge: preferences are not any more ‘given’ than knowledge. Although people find it hard to reason about what they want, determining what you want is just as much a matter of giving reasons and elaborating conceptions. Such conceptions are not the same as preconceptions about what the world is like: you can have consistent but unrealistic desires, and expectations without illusions. Both, however, do not translate knowledge into decision-making. In order to create a rational basis for decision-making, reflections on what you want and what the world is like must be combined; and this is where ideals come into play.

What does this have to do with ‘thinking with history’, specifically? There are two answers to that question. One is that, in a view of intellectual history in which knowledge is part of what people do,

the role of ideals between action and knowledge is crucial in rendering some historical actor's thought meaningful. Another is that 'thinking with history' is inherent to the development and scrutiny of ideals.

Both answers risk supporting a 'mythology' of the kind that Skinner rejects. If ideals are used to make an author's work meaningful by making it coherent, then that is a 'mythology of coherence'. If 'thinking with history' is forced upon us when we elaborate our ideals, then we are not, in Skinner's sense, 'doing our thinking for ourselves', but rather following a 'mythology of doctrine'. These risks can be averted, however, once we realize that ideals do not fill the gaps in our knowledge, and that they can be part of a social environment without being shared.

To start with the first answer. Postulating ideals to represent someone's less-than-coherent thought as coherent would be fuzzy logic. To choose a mean example: the fact that McDowell believes in *Bildung* does not explain how the world exerts a rational constraint upon our thinking. Still, *Bildung* is part of his conception of how things should be, and it performs a constitutive role in his thinking in that it makes him fit together Aristotle's moral realism, Kant's transcendental philosophy, Evans's semantics, Gadamer's hermeneutics, and Wittgenstein's philosophical therapy. This is not a cocktail I would swallow, but the test of coherence is McDowell's conception of *Bildung*, not the ingredients. If Gadamer or Wittgenstein got it wrong, McDowell may still have gotten the right thing out of them and vice versa.

To choose a more historical example (closer to Skinner): Hobbes has a certain conception of scientificity and the ideal commonwealth, and this leads him to elaborate a political science that results in a less-than-utopian image of what the state should be like. No one, nowadays, shares Hobbes's ideas about science (although Shapin and Shaffer conclude that he was right in his objections against Boyle); so people who think, with Hobbes, that society should be based on 'organized distrust' have to develop a conception of political science that preserves this insight. Hobbes's ideas about science and the commonwealth are not made more coherent by 'seeing them in their time', for they were controversial then as well. Nevertheless, both the ideals of scientific reason and of the commonwealth are essential to a coherent understanding of *what he was doing* in writing *Leviathan*.

These examples are still very much about ideas. The point of emphasizing the role of ideals in reasoning, however, is not that it shows someone's ideas to be coherent in an unexpected way, but that it puts the whole of a person's actions, ideas and situation at scrutiny. This is a holistic view on interpretation: investigation into the role of clocks, air-pumps, and prison and hospital regimes can contribute to it. It is inescapable that ideals are seen 'in context', even as 'part of a larger conversation'. But 'contexts' by themselves explain nothing, and argument about how things should be is not an 'invisible hand' in the history of ideas.

This brings us to the second answer. Thinking with history is forced upon us for two main reasons: if

there was no historical accumulation of ideas we would not get far thinking for ourselves, and ideals depend for their relevance on a historically contingent situation. It is exactly *when* we are doing our thinking for ourselves that we must check the newness of our ideals against the old ones, and make explicit what we mean by pointing out the difference it makes. But it is still *we* who do the thinking, not the ideals.

To show that thinking with history does not force us into a ‘mythology of doctrine’, yet another example. It is important to realize that Wilhelm von Humboldt’s ‘Theorie der Bildung des Menschen’ is a five-page piece, not quite as important for his thought about Bildung as his work for the Prussian education reform and his later linguistic studies. The chapter on Bildung in Hegel’s *Phänomenologie* is entirely about the individual and the community, not about Greeks or aesthetics or language and history or any other theme that is associated with the topic. Uses of ‘Bildung’ in German literature may be about form or formation without any ideological connotations, and the phrase ‘the ideal of Bildung’ or *das Bildungsideal* did not become current until the 1880’s: none of the canonical ‘Bildung’ authors describe it as an ideal, although they hold ideals that revolve around the notion of Bildung. So ‘thinking with history’, in this case, cannot be a historical comparison of formulations of the ‘ideal of Bildung’; at best, it can be a rational reconstruction.

Even this would be more than Skinner permits: for if we can ‘rationally reconstruct’ Kant’s ideal of Bildung, we can say that Kant had an ‘undeveloped’ ideal of Bildung. That would be anachronistic indeed. Still, there must be some way to compare one’s ideals to those of others, and to judge them coherent, plausible, desirable etc.; else they would become a private language. Ideals must be made explicit. Now Davidson’s theory of interpretation shows for communication in general that it is not necessary to assume a shared framework, as long as we are competent language users, for we are competent precisely because we can construct an interpretation on basis of our own beliefs and standards. In the same vein, ideals can be reconstructed from what people say and do by comparing those with how one’s own thoughts and actions relate to conceptions of how things should be. Of course, such an interpretation must allow for the possibility that people say or do one thing and think another, for else it would collapse under anomalies. But without coherence between thought and action, there is nothing to interpret.

Making ideals explicit can be painstaking. For the *politeness* example from the previous chapter, the situation is relatively simple: the relation to what we do is direct, and there are conventional tests of coherence (‘is this fair?’, ‘would you be treated like that yourself?’, ‘is all this polite talk really necessary?’). With ideals like Bildung, the amount of potentially relevant information for judging someone’s use of it coherent is infinite. When you call your ideas by a certain name, you are already thinking with history for the sake of convenience: it may not be exactly what you mean, but at least it gets some meaning across quickly. Calling your ideals by a certain name is one way of making them coherent. Accordingly, when they are being scrutinized, part of the test is whether they still can be called by that name.



Elaborating ideals, and thinking with history, are part of our Bildung. That is how Rorty sees it and I agree with him. The first part of my thesis, about the role of ideals in reasoning, has already given a partial answer to the second question: *what does 'Bildung' mean?*

But the proof of the pudding is in the eating. So far, we have seen only very limited examples of the role of ideals in reasoning, and nothing has shown the difference between having an ideal of Bildung, lacking such an ideal, and lacking the word. These things will require some thinking with history; that is what I will attempt in the second part.



## II. History

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## 1. Yet another Introduction

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What does ‘Bildung’ mean? There is a lot to be said about that that is not philosophically problematic. In the critical lexicon *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, there is an excellent 44-page lemma explaining how the word was introduced into the German language, with what other terms it was related and contrasted, which authors gave it a certain influential definition or use, and how it came to stand for cultural and political issues.<sup>56</sup> I do not mean to suggest that this is all plain historical fact. On the contrary, such phenomena as the ‘tyranny of Greece over Germany’, the development of a doctrine of ‘aesthetic education’, the birth of ‘anthropology’ or the ‘human sciences’, and the German ‘mandarin culture’ are all enigmatic and historically unique occurrences, whose explanation requires a lot of ‘thinking with history’. But the fact that people started teaching ‘linguistics’ and ‘literary history’, looked with a different eye on ancient Greece and invented a ‘national identity’, all with an appeal to Bildung, does not tell us *why* they did so, or what difference it makes to drag in the ‘B’-word. An *explanation* of these facts would indeed be philosophically problematic, and tell us something about what ‘Bildung’ means and what difference it makes as well. This is not a mere theoretical claim: authors on the above subjects *have*, indeed, told us something about what ‘Bildung’ means.<sup>57</sup> But a comprehensive answer along these lines would describe ‘Bildung’ as the common denominator of a whole lot of historical phenomena, with no obvious limit, rather than as an ideal that people can adhere to and argue about.

In this second part of my thesis, I am not going to attempt a synthesis of historical phenomena. Rather, I will be concerned with the problem how anything like a ‘role’ or ‘meaning’ can be assigned to such a word as ‘Bildung’. It is one thing to find something coherent in the various ways the term ‘Bildung’ has been used. It is another thing, and a bigger problem, to see what difference it makes. This is a judgement not merely on what people from the past meant, but also on how to practice the ‘history of ideas’ or ‘intellectual history’, not only on what things were significant, but also on *why* they were and how they were *made* significant. In these judgements, effectively, one can find ideals at work for

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<sup>56</sup> Rudolf Vierhaus, ‘Bildung’, in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* Band I, pp. 508-51

<sup>57</sup> This is best exemplified by the attempts to explain the ‘birth of anthropology’ and the German ‘Mandarin culture’ in John Zammuto’s *Kant, Herder and the Birth of Anthropology* and Fritz Ringer’s *The Decline of the German Mandarins*, respectively. Karl Dahlhaus has written extensively about 19<sup>th</sup> century music as part of a *Bildungskultur*. So far, I believe there has been no satisfactory explanation for the infatuation of German thinkers with ancient Greece (least of all in Ellen Butler’s *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany*), but for those who doubt that it has anything to do with *Bildung*, I recommend Schlegel’s pioneer work *Über das Studium der Griechischen Poesie* and, for a later example, Werner Jaeger’s *Paideia*.

which *Bildung* is not the worst word: ideals that guide the search for meaning in language and history. The problem of Part II, then, is a double one: how historical interpretations can give meaning to words like 'Bildung', and how some conception of *Bildung* is operative in these very heuristics. My interest, after all, is with the role of ideals in reasoning.

My approach will be as follows. In Part I, I showed how an ideal of *Bildung* was operative in the philosophies of language of Rorty and McDowell, and how this led to a certain style of thinking with history. Why is *Bildung* the right word for what they want? Both take their cue from Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose historical hermeneutics incorporates a definition of *Bildung*, a theory of how language, and key concepts like *Bildung* in particular, are operative in history, and a programme for making historical and linguistic interpretation morally significant, which is again summed up in the word *Bildung*. Therefore, this hermeneutics provides an excellent example of ideals at work and under scrutiny in a historical interpretation. Two issues are raised which are crucial to the chapters that follow: how finding meaning and relevance in the past involves a judgement on historical *continuity and discontinuity*, and how it involves a *choice of words*.

I will discuss these issues by pairing philosophical views with historical heuristics that follow the same vein. In chapter two, Gadamer's hermeneutics is compared to Reinhart Koselleck's historical semantics as applied to 'Bildung'. Chapter three discusses Dietrich Busse's critique of historical semantics as an application of Foucault and Kuhn. Chapter four compares Rorty's views on history and edification to Hayden White's *Metahistory*. Then finally, chapter five will present my own views on the matter.

A short motivation of why these issues are raised.

*Historical (dis)continuity* is an issue because to say that *Bildung* means this or that is to say that it makes a difference. What is this difference? One can describe it terms of a changing world, or of changing relations between concepts, or of different ways of making oneself explicit, but if there is any meaning to its use, then when it comes to be used or used differently, something has changed. Here 'meaning' tends to blend with 'impact', 'relevance', or 'significance'. Gadamer, for instance, describes *Bildung* as the key concept of a conceptual revolution. Such judgements, *as well as their complete negation*, are judgements on the impact of conceptual change on one's mind and world. Koselleck sees the development of *Bildung* as an emancipatory ideal as part of a larger change of orientation; Busse denies that words represent 'concepts' which have an 'orientation'.

These heuristic considerations relate to a problem from Part I: the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme. *Bildung*, with Rorty and Gadamer, is defined in a historical argument which gives rise to conceptual relativism. A change of heuristics affects both the meaning we can give to past uses of 'Bildung', and the use we can make of it now.

*The choice of words* performs a similar double role in determining what *Bildung* means. What is to be explained is why people chose this word – which again involves questions of how words affect one's

mind and world – but this explanation itself is a choice of words. Both choices reflect a motivation, and must somehow be perceived as relevant. Then and now, the question *What does Bildung mean?* becomes *Why Bildung?* Busse defends a heuristics of ‘discursive strategies’; Rorty describes choices of words as acts of ‘narrative self-constitution’; White gives an analysis of how the historian’s choice of words reflects a poetic act and an ideological commitment. This calls attention to another problem from Part I – creativity in reasoning.

Historiological accounts of creativity in reasoning – in Gadamer’s *Wahrheit und Methode*, Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, and White’s *Metahistory* – tend to transform language into some kind of magic. Gadamer sees history as an ongoing exchange of metaphors, White has it continually reinvented by the historian’s imagination, and Rorty does both. My contention is that there is much more information conveyed in the choice of words than these historiologies can account for, and that this relies on inferential processes which cannot be reduced to some kind of tropology or poetology.

Conceptual history is not a literary canon, and people are not poems. The creative choice of words takes place in a field of conflicting interests and strategies, and it is this inherent conflict that makes it less than ‘free-spinning’. Acquiring this competence is a painful and open-ended process of self-development, and explaining what people were doing with words shows them putting themselves at stake. In these metahistorical reflections, then, I am effectively developing my own conception of *Bildung*.

## 2. Language, History and Art in *Wahrheit und Methode*

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There is a claim, on page 7 of *Wahrheit und Methode*, that I find highly problematic:

An dem Begriff der *Bildung* wird am deutlichsten fühlbar, was für ein tiefgreifender geistiger Wandel es ist, der uns mit dem Jahrhundert Goethes noch immer wie gleichzeitig sein, dagegen selbst schon mit dem Zeitalter der Barock wie mit einer geschichtlichen Vorzeit rechnen läßt. Entscheidende Begriffe und Worte, mit denen wir zu arbeiten pflegen, erhielten damals ihre Prägung und wer sich nicht von der Sprache treiben lassen will, sondern um ein begründetes geschichtliches Selbstverständnis bemüht ist, sieht sich von einer Frage der Wort- und Begriffsgeschichte in die andere genötigt.

In this passage, *Bildung* is mentioned as an example of how our way of speaking about the world changes over time. But that is not all. The notion of *Bildung*, Gadamer suggests, is not merely an outstanding example of conceptual innovation, it is also one of those key notions that are essential to our self-understanding, and the revolution that made it a key concept signifies a break in history.

Surprisingly enough, after having made this suggestion, Gadamer does not make an effort to prove it, or to explain how it could be proved. Moreover, after its introduction as one of the ‘humanistische Leitbegriffe’, *Bildung* is hardly mentioned any further in *Wahrheit und Methode*, even though Humboldt plays an important role in the concluding chapters. What Gadamer is after, throughout the book, is not a definition of *Bildung* but the foundations of ‘historical self-understanding’. The notion of *Bildung* is introduced as part of this self-understanding, even as a crucial part. Arguably, the quest for historical self-understanding that Gadamer propagates *is* a process of *Bildung*. One may judge so from his claims on page 9:

In der Tat hat Hegel, was *Bildung* ist, am schärfsten herausgearbeitet. Ihm folgen wir zunächst. Er hat auch gesehen, daß die Philosophie “die Bedingung ihrer Existenz in der *Bildung* hat”, und wir fügen hinzu: mit ihr die Geisteswissenschaften. Denn das Sein des Geistes ist mit der Idee der *Bildung* wesentlich verknüpft.

The definition of Hegel’s that Gadamer follows, is that of *Bildung* as an ‘Erhebung zur Allgemeinheit’<sup>58</sup>. According to this definition, one ‘rises to generality’ by developing an understanding for what is alien, not only in the sense of gathering knowledge but also of showing

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<sup>58</sup> I have been unable to retrace the exact phrase in Hegel’s works, but it is okay as a shorthand for Hegel’s writings on *Bildung* in the *Phänomenologie*, the *Philosophische Propädeutik* and the lectures on the philosophy of history, as gathered in Jürgen-Eckhardt Pleines (ed.), *Hegels Theorie der Bildung I: Materialien zu ihrer Interpretation*.



moral self-restraint. A person of *Bildung* is someone who knows that he is one person among others, and that he should neither follow his own inclinations or interests nor slavishly follow the world but that he should, instead, engage in dialectics. This, Gadamer thinks, is a far more substantial conception of knowledge and understanding than the ‘historical hermeneutics’ elaborated by Schleiermacher and Dilthey.

Gadamer’s goal, throughout *Wahrheit und Methode*, is to describe the whole of understanding – not just historical interpretation, but our whole mode of being in the world – as engaging in conversation. This understanding is not primordially a process of observing and knowing (as Gadamer suggests natural science would have it), but of things coming to the understanding through history and language – and the key to it is not scientific observation, but the experience of art. The idea is that a piece of art is not something to be known as a fact about nature, but to be encountered, and that this encounter is a type of ‘play’ that requires not explanation, but participation. (‘Play’, therefore, is a serious affair.) Likewise, as we encounter the world around us, and talk about it, we are participating in an ongoing game. Language, then, is part of a game we play with the world, something like the ball in a catch-and-throw game – *Sein, daß Verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache*<sup>59</sup> – and history is an ongoing conversation.

‘Erhebung zur Allgemeinheit’, in this context, would mean to learn how to participate in this process, game, conversation, or whatever. Although Gadamer does not say so with so many words, his theory of understanding (hermeneutics) indeed describes a process of *Bildung*, and a familiar one: a process of joint moral and intellectual education, guided by language, history, and art. It is fitting that Gadamer’s reflections on language as the key to our world experience, which form the closing part of *Wahrheit und Methode*, are dominated by Humboldt’s ideas.

Language, history and art form the ground plan for *Wahrheit und Methode*, as they form the outline of Gadamer’s project. In part one, his aim is to ‘recover the question of truth through the experience of art’; in part two, to ‘extend this question to historical understanding and the human sciences’; in part three, to give it substance in a ‘hermeneutic ontology led by language’. Throughout this long and dangerous journey of exploration, Gadamer’s tacit assumption is that anything substantial written on these subjects has been written by Germans after 1770: although some humanist predecessors are duly mentioned in passing, a chapter devoted to Greek and scholastic ideas about language, and Plato and Aristotle loom large as ancestral heads, the tradition that the question of truth must be ‘recovered from’ is the tradition of Kant and Schiller, Humboldt and Herder, Schleiermacher and Dilthey.

What Gadamer means by ‘tiefgreifende geistige Wandlung’, then, is that Language, History and Art were indeed discovered in Germany around the time of Goethe. The Enlightenment, accordingly, is Gadamer’s *bête noire*: the main argument of his hermeneutics is directed against the Enlightenment’s

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<sup>59</sup> *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 450

‘prejudice against prejudice’ and outright rejection of authority. Kant and Schiller’s aesthetics are ‘dubious’ because they identify art with appearance, the historicist tradition is trapped in an ‘aporia’ because it sticks to an essentially ‘enlightened’ epistemological mode of inquiry, and language must be freed from logical grammar – whenever the Enlightenment or some Enlightenment doctrine is mentioned in *Wahrheit und Methode*, it is something to supersede or get rid of. From his Hegelian and historically well-informed position, perhaps the Enlightenment has its merit as a grand negation, but that does not shake his conviction that Enlightenment is ephemeral.

A case has been made against this view of the ‘ephemeral Enlightenment’ – most ardently by Ernst Cassirer and Peter Gay<sup>60</sup> – which throws the view that it was blind to language, history and art into doubt; after all, Hume and Voltaire wrote history, Diderot and Lessing about art, and the ‘origins of language’ were a favourite pastime for speculation. But all that is not reason enough to reject the idea of a profound change of mind altogether. According to Gadamer, if we want to understand what *Bildung* means, we are led ‘von einer Frage der Wort- und Begriffsgeschichte in die andere’: it is on a par with concepts that are ‘selbstverständlich’ to the modern mind, like ‘die Kunst’, ‘die Geschichte’, ‘das Schöpferische’, ‘Weltanschauung’, ‘Erlebnis’, ‘Genie’, ‘Außenwelt’, ‘Innerlichkeit’, ‘Ausdruck’, ‘Stil’, ‘Symbol’.<sup>61</sup> All these words existed, and some were current, before the time of Goethe and co.; but together they are part of a new scheme of understanding. Gadamer’s first step in his argument is to explain the merits of *Bildung* in terms of ‘sensus communis’, ‘Urteilkraft’, and ‘Geschmack’ – which all indicate some capacity to sense, understand or interpret. If you have *Bildung*, you see the world in different terms.

This idea – that many of our leading concepts underwent a massive redefinition sometimes after 1750 – has much stronger support than the idea of an ‘ephemeral Enlightenment’. The lexicon *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, which has traced the use and origin of 130 fundamental concepts in modern history, states it as follows:

Der *heuristische Vorgriff* der Lexiconsarbeit besteht in der Vermutung, daß sich seit der Mitte des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts ein tiefgreifender Bedeutungswandel klassischer topoi vollzogen, daß alte Worte neue Sinngehalte gewonnen haben, die mit Annäherung an unsere Gegenwart keiner Übersetzung mehr bedürftig sind. Der heuristische Vorgriff führt sozusagen eine “Sattelzeit” ein, in der sich die Herkunft zu unserer Präsenz wandelt. Entsprechende Begriffe tragen ein Janusgesicht: rückwärtsgewandt meinen sie soziale und politische Sachverhalte, die uns ohne kritischen Kommentar nicht mehr verständlich sind, vorwärts und uns zugewandt haben sie Bedeutungen gewonnen, die zwar erläutert werden können, die aber auch unmittelbar selbstverständlich zu sein scheinen. Begrifflichkeit und Begriff fallen seitdem für uns zusammen.

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<sup>60</sup> See Cassirer, *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung*, which vehemently attacks ‘[d]ie landläufige Ansicht, daß das achtzehnte Jahrhundert ein spezifisch ‘unhistorisches’ Zeitalter gewesen sei’ (p. 206), and Gay, *The Enlightenment. An Interpretation*, which emphasizes the Enlightenment’s classical legacy (Vol. I, *The Rise of Modern Paganism*) and its discovery of aesthetics and the science of man (Vol. II, *The Science of Freedom*).

<sup>61</sup> *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 7

Dieser Vorgriff hat sich, von bezeichnenden Ausnahmen abgesehen, bewährt.<sup>62</sup>

There are two mismatches with Gadamer's 'profound change of mind': the lexicon covers social and political concepts, not the jargon of *Wahrheit und Methode*; and the 'Sattelzeit' includes the Enlightenment. Still, these are claims about analogous and contemporary processes; if both are right, it is hard to believe there were two simultaneous and unrelated conceptual revolutions. Reinhart Koselleck, one of the lexicon's editors and initiators, has elaborated its heuristics further on his own account: in his view, one characteristic of the period is that generic terms become *Kollektivsingulare*. 'Collective singulars' are abstract and complex concepts, whose content is essentially *open* and subject to reflection, that gather a plurality under a singular denominator and generally point toward something *to be realized*.<sup>63</sup> Examples of such collective singulars are 'State', 'Democracy' and 'Politics', but also 'Art' and 'History' – and indeed, *Bildung* and *Aufklärung* as well.

With the formation of collective singulars, according to Koselleck, comes a further change in orientation: key concepts are directed towards the future. *Reformation* and *Renaissance* were classifications *ex post*; even *Aufklärung* came up only towards the end of the Age of Enlightenment.<sup>64</sup> But it marks a sea-change in that it is innovative and programmatic: you could say, in the last third of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, that you lived in an age of Enlightenment and *it made a difference*. At the same time, the underdetermined meaning of collective singulars made it possible for different speakers to mould its meaning to their own image. With the change of orientation, collective singulars become inescapable to define the status quo and your own position, but they also become controversial as soon as they become current. This is what happens to *Aufklärung*; it is also what happens to *Bildung* at the hands of conservatives, liberals, socialists, philosophers, philologists, scientists and artists.

Compare this to Gadamer's views on language, history and art. Obviously, their 'discovery' can be redescribed as the formation of collective singulars. Gadamer's reproach against the Enlightenment is not so much that these things did not exist before Goethe, but that it failed to acknowledge they had a life and meaning of their own. It took Romanticism and German Idealism to change that. But what changes – if there is a common denominator to that in Gadamer's thought – is not a shift in orientation towards the future, but a different attitude with regard to understanding. This is what leads Gadamer to define the theme of *Wahrheit und Methode* as 'the hermeneutical problem' and *Bildung* as 'the greatest idea of the 18<sup>th</sup> century', what is exemplified first by Kant's Copernican turn and Herder's recognition of the 'Einheit von Denken und Sprechen', what culminates in Hegel's encompassing dialectics and Heidegger's analysis of 'Dasein als Verstehen'.

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<sup>62</sup> *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* Band I, p. XV

<sup>63</sup> 'Begriffliche Innovationen der Aufklärungssprache' in *Begriffsgeschichten*, pp. 330-3

<sup>64</sup> Idem, pp. 319-20. Indeed, when Kant and Mendelssohn answered the question, *Was ist Aufklärung*, in 1784, Kant wrote that we hear ever more often that we live in an Age of Enlightenment without knowing what it means, and Mendelssohn described *Cultur*, *Bildung*, *Aufklärung* as newcomers in the language: 'sie gehören von der Hand bloß zur Büchersprache. Der gemeine Haufe versteht sie kaum.' Cf. *Was ist Aufklärung? Beiträge aus der Berliner Monatsschrift*, p. 444

It remains something of a mystery, though, how this change in attitude pushed through. Gadamer lays a lot of weight on the ideal of *Bildung*: ‘Herder vor allem war es, der den Perfektionismus der Aufklärung durch das neue Ideal einer “Bildung des Menschen” überbot und damit den Boden bereitete, auf dem sich im 19. Jahrhundert die historischen Geisteswissenschaften entfalten konnten.’<sup>65</sup>

In so far as understanding in the historical human sciences is characteristic for the change in attitude at large, Gadamer is implying that this profound change of mind was inherent in the ideal of *Bildung*!

Koselleck takes a less dramatic view on how *Bildung* supplanted Enlightenment in Germany. The term *Aufklärung*, he writes, was less adequate for the purpose to which it was put from the moment of its introduction. It was eclipsed as *Bildung* gained currency, and when 19<sup>th</sup> century historians used it to name a period, they had to reintroduce it between parentheses.

Dieser Verfall ist darauf zurückzuführen, daß inzwischen ein Begriff geprägt wurde, der das emanzipatorische Postulat der Aufklärung im Deutschen Sprachhaushalt sehr viel konsistenter einlöste, nämlich der Bildungsbegriff. Wer davon ausgeht, daß heteronome Bedingungen in autonome Selbstbestimmung überführt werden sollen, dem legt sich nahe, mit dem Bildungsbegriff weiterzuarbeiten. “Aufklärung” ließ immer auch die Aufklärung von außen und von oben mitdenken. Erst Selbstaufklärung führt zur Bildung. Und Bildung ist eo ipso Selbstbildung.<sup>66</sup>

Koselleck’s explanation is more plausible because it is less demanding – it is not a leap between conceptual schemes, and it is not a hidden potential of the word or a brilliant insight of Kant’s or Herder’s that does the trick. Still, the explanation leaves something to be desired. For if *Bildung* is only one of many new concepts – and certainly German Idealism and Romanticism coined and redefined *a lot* of words – the purposes behind these new uses can hardly have been pre-established. Nobody *planned* Sturm und Drang or the gathering of young wild minds at Jena; no-one intended to *invent* Language, History or Art. Koselleck acknowledges this, as he applies heideggerianisms like ‘Vorgriff’ and ‘Wagnis’ to meanings, concepts and ideas,<sup>67</sup> and describes collective singulars as ‘open’, ‘innovative’, and ‘fundamentally metaphorical’.<sup>68</sup> In this respect, he is Gadamer’s faithful pupil.

Gadamer has a much stronger conception of reasoning as a creative enterprise than any of the protagonists of Part I. For him, reasoning *is* the creative use of words. It is only because humans have a language that they *have a world* instead of living in an environment: because they can explain things, and talk about them, they stand in a free and detached relation to them. Now there is an infinity of things to be understood, and a limited number of words; but what we understand must somehow be explained. Since Gadamer does not want to draw limits to the understanding (a good Hegelian

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<sup>65</sup> *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 6-7

<sup>66</sup> *Begriffsgeschichten*, p. 327

<sup>67</sup> *idem*, p. 37: ‘Begriffen werden dann zu Vorgriffen’; p. 339: ‘Geschichte zu denken bleibt ein Wagnis’.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Revolution als Begriff und als Metapher’, in *Begriffsgeschichten*, pp. 240-51

argument), and maintains that understanding and the possibility of explanation are equivalent (a good Wittgensteinian argument), he cannot rest content with the idea that words are signs for things. If meanings were fixed, we would indeed be confined to a limited world view by the language we know. But language is not a scheme to some external world, it is what makes us have a world, and part of an experienced and lived reality. In his own way, Gadamer comes to reject the dualism of scheme and content; this is summed up by the phrase *grundsätzliche Metaphorik der Sprache*.<sup>69</sup>

By this, Gadamer does not mean that words always mean something that they do not mean, but that the whole distinction between literal and transferred meaning is an imposition. Words can refer only because they can evoke. Although there is no communication without convention, pure conventional talk is meaningless; for words relate to states of affairs not through some abstract relation of reference, but by being wound up in our entire lived experience (which, for Gadamer and fellow phenomenologists, *is* reality proper). Despite cultural and linguistic boundaries, this experience is essentially open: ‘hinter allen Relativitäten von Sprachen und Konventionen [liegt] ein Gemeinsames, daß überhaupt nicht mehr Sprache ist, sondern ein auf mögliche Versprachlichung angelegtes Gemeinsames, für das vielleicht das gute Wort Vernunft noch nicht ganz das schlechteste ist.’<sup>70</sup> Reasoning, then, is bringing unto words.

This philosophy of language has some unsavoury consequences. First, it heralds poetry as the highest form of thought, without whose guardianship the public mind would decline into unreason and meaningless chatter. On top of that, it identifies truth with openness towards the world, of which the ‘poetic mode of being’ is of course the highest form – so everyone has his own unique experience of the world, only some are more unique than others, and so they possess some ‘higher truth’. Second, the phrase *grundsätzliche Metaphorik* lends support to the idea that there exists something like ‘primitive language’, which, lacking adequate concepts of cause and reason, operates instead with myth and analogy – as if ‘primitive’ languages do not have fully developed tense and mood systems, entailment relations and argument structure. Third, and more immediately relevant: viewing concepts foremost as open metaphors leads one to disregard what they are *used* for.

Bildung, for instance, is not merely a metaphor for self-development. It also stood for a century of classicist drill at German gymnasias (where Greek and Latin filled up to half the curriculum), a mandarin class of academics and civil servants, and a wider, but still exclusive *Bildungsbürgertum*. With this knowledge, it is strange to read in Koselleck that Bildung ‘ein Begriff bleibt, der sich einer Einengung auf soziale Schranken entzieht’.<sup>71</sup> Sure enough, Koselleck and Gadamer *knew* the pedagogical crimes committed in the name of Bildung, and the emptiness of the ideal where it became an ideology. Gadamer’s judgement on it, in his rectoral address of 1947, is heavy.<sup>72</sup> He denounces

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<sup>69</sup> *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 409

<sup>70</sup> ‘Wieweit schreibt Sprache das Denken vor?’, in: *Kleine Schriften IV: Variationen*, p. 91

<sup>71</sup> ‘Zur anthropologischen und semantischen Struktur der Bildung’, in *Begriffsgeschichten*, p. 130

<sup>72</sup> ‘Über die Ursprünglichkeit der Philosophie’, in *Kleine Schriften I: Philosophie. Hermeneutik*.

‘Bildungsidealismus’ as a flawed and bourgeois version of German Idealism, that has proven powerless against the rise of Nazism. But his own philosophy does nothing to resolve this discrepancy between open-ended ideals and compelling realities. If classical Bildung humanism failed against the Nazis, then going Heideggerian is an unlikely cure. I agree with Gadamer that reasoning is a creative enterprise, but not that it depends on some deeper potential of language, which is conveyed in metaphors. Speaking of the foundations of language, we had better stick to Jackendoff’s principle that there is no magic.

There is more to be said about this philosophy of language, though, with regard to the problem of historical continuity and discontinuity. On the one hand, the claim that language is fundamentally metaphorical divides the history of ideas into a period before, and after this was recognized. On the other hand, for Gadamer the meaning of a term is established in an ongoing exchange, and meanings do not exist independently of etymologies – *sprachliche Form und überlieferter Inhalt lassen sich in der hermeneutischen Erfahrung nicht trennen*.<sup>73</sup> This is again an argument for the ‘fundamentally metaphorical’ character of language, since etymologies are often highly metaphorical. But it suggests at once a historically continuous development of meaning, and a historical view on language which does not take such developments for granted.

The emergence of historical consciousness, according to Gadamer, both requires and produces discontinuity in the history of ideas. To see the past in its own right is to see the distance that separates it from the present. ‘Seither ist die Kontinuität der abendländischen Denktradition nur noch in gebrochener Weise wirksam’<sup>74</sup> – but this is a gain more than a loss, for temporal distance is not a gap to be bridged but a condition for rising above your local point of view. To have reminiscence, to have a history, you must first be able to forget.

Language is what keeps the moments in history together. Gadamer’s verdict on historicism is that it reifies the past, a set of meanings in context, a commodity. As he sees it, there is nothing commodious about having a past: it poses a continuous challenge, to choose your words critically and conscientiously. This goes for the history of concepts at large: it is an ongoing reconsideration of words, in which slow or drastic changes of meaning occur, words pack into jargons, dissolve, go in and out of use. The choice of words makes sense only against a background of previous use; but to make them your own, you must use them creatively, evoke something, make them new. (Take away the background and you get raw attempts at evocation, like in modernist art.) Choosing your words, in

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<sup>73</sup> *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 417. This is one of Gadamer’s arguments against the existence of such a thing as language as supposed by linguists; in ‘Begriffsgeschichte als Philosophie’ he says in so many words, ‘es gibt vielleicht auch nicht so selbstverständlich, wie das die heutige Sprachforschung annimmt, Sprachen’. (*Kleine Schriften III: Idee und Sprache*, p. 240)

<sup>74</sup> *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. XXX; Gadamer calls this a development ‘of the last centuries’, but I feel bound to add that it was mainly an accomplishment of Enlightenment historians, not of earlier humanists nor of later historians.

this view, is thinking with history.<sup>75</sup>

(It is important to realize that, for Gadamer, changes in meaning are not merely *indications* that the world has changed; since history is made of words, the life of words *is* history. And even the meaningless, unreflected talk of the crowd is part of it, doing the forgetting so that others can do the remembering.)

This is an idea I really do not know what to think of. I share with Gadamer the conviction that reasoning is a creative process, which we need to use and understand language. Such creativity is at work not only in the choice of *le mot juste*, but also in processes of inference and hypothesis formulation. Also, I think such creativity involves ideals, and that one way of elaborating ideals is thinking with history. But it does not follow that competent language use is thinking with history. Certainly, knowledge of history will feed your imagination and vocabulary – other things will do that as well. (TV, music, backpacking, physics, people, will all feed your imagination and vocabulary.) That is not Gadamer's point. His idea is not that historical knowledge should be wormed into a theory of linguistic competence, but that *history speaks through us*.

How to argue against such an idea? For a start, one could say that it is not much help in a linguistic theory, and that it assigns a privileged role to historical development over other influences on language use, or rather turns everything into history. All that is true, but it does not prove the idea inconsistent. A more direct way of attack is this: it is a trick to have your cake and eat it. For language is made to assure both continuity and discontinuity in history, and history exerts a normative force on language use both in actual conventions and in the demand for critical awareness. But the demand to see the past as something different *and* to make it exert a normative force leaves the critical awareness in a double bind.

For where, precisely, is the normative force? Parading historical figures as moral examples, and learning Homer and Goethe by heart, is not a recipe for becoming a better person: for that would make them commodious, contemporaries wearing historical costumes, not so *distant* and *different* anymore. Seeing them in context, acting out their particular habitus, choosing available options, forming beliefs as their era permitted, is no alternative: that would leave them with no message to the present. What Gadamer ends up with, instead, is seeing historical development as the highest good.

A perfect illustration of the problem is Bruno Snell's recension of Werner Jaeger's *Paideia*. Jaeger had attempted to give humanism a new impulse by arguing that Greek culture as a whole embodied not only an aesthetic ideal, but also an ethical and political ideal of humanity, and that this ideal was expounded and developed in all its great works.<sup>76</sup> Snell avers that this attributed preellenistic authors

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<sup>75</sup> See 'Begriffsgeschichte als Philosophie', and also 'Die Begriffsgeschichte und die Sprache der Philosophie', in: *Kleine Schriften IV: Variationen*.

<sup>76</sup> In fact, this was not an entirely novel insight; Friedrich Schlegel's juvenile work *Über das Studium der Griechischen Poesie* had stressed (in 1795!) that an encompassing, 'political' view on Greek Bildung, which

with an entirely anachronistic ‘ideal of humanity’, and an equally anachronistic intention to teach it. The heroes of Homer and Pindar are great, but not great for the sake of teaching greatness; to see *paideia* as the *goal* of *dikè* and *arête* is to turn values upside down. ‘Denn es ist der Fluch alles Pädagogischen, daß es aus sich heraus kein Ziel und keinen Inhalt setzen kann; wer das “Bildende” und das “Formende” in die Mitte rückt, verliert das Sachliche aus den Augen.’<sup>77</sup> Nothing follows from Jaeger’s ‘political’ ideal: it is no help to the classicist, nor to actual politics. Classicists, Snell concludes, do better research without such vagueries.

What Snell calls ‘the curse of everything pedagogical’ is over *Wahrheit und Methode* as well as over *Paideia*. But Snell’s conclusion is disappointing. Of course ideals are vague. They are not *facts*. They concern things that should be, and are woven into a less-than-coherent, unperspicuously intricate web of beliefs. Still, they must be made explicit *somehow*. It is a good thing that Gadamer and Jaeger expose the ideals behind their theories and interpretations; the problem is not that they have these ideals, but that they fail to convince of a picture of how things have been, or how things should be. Gadamer’s ideas about historical continuity and language commit him to the idea that there is something deep going on in history, which does not tell us what to do but which we should follow nonetheless.

The conclusion of *Wahrheit und Methode* is: ‘Wir sind als Verstehende in ein Wahrheitsgeschehen einbezogen und kommen gleichsam zu spät, wenn wir wissen wollen, was wir glauben sollen.’<sup>78</sup> What I find worthwhile and stimulating in Gadamer’s work can be preserved without this imperative. We do not need to believe that there is a higher truth or deeper meaning in thinking with history, only that it is a way of putting your ideals at scrutiny. I think that a theory of the role of ideals in reasoning can replace Gadamer’s theory of the role of prejudice in interpretation. Also, the case for reasoning as a creative process would be helped more by a solid theory of linguistic competence than by an appeal to the poets.

These claims of mine, however, do not solve the problem of historical continuity. In the following chapters, I will discuss views that diverge from Gadamer’s with regard to conceptual history: Dietrich Busse’s critique of *Begriffsgeschichte* in favor of a historical semantics that is part language game theory, and part discourse analysis; and Rorty and Hayden White’s ironism with regard to historical narratives.

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covers moral, aesthetic and intellectual elements, is possible only since Kant has written the third Critique and Fichte ‘discovered the foundations of critical philosophy’. (*Kritische Schriften und Fragmente*, Band I, pp. 325, 357-8)

<sup>77</sup> ‘Besprechung von W. Jaeger, *Paideia*’, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, p. 38. It must be said that both *Paideia* and the review were courageous things to write in 1933 and 1935.

<sup>78</sup> *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 465



### 3. Discourse, Paradigms, Ideals

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If one ‘theory of history’ radically contradicts the idea of historical continuity, lessons from the past, and the traditional ‘history of ideas’ that comes with it, it is Foucault’s. In the introduction to *L’Archéologie du Savoir*, Foucault urges that the grand problem for historical analysis of texts is posed by discontinuities – the problem is not to find relations, origins and influences, for historians have already found rather too many of them, but to see where words no longer mean the same thing, the same statement does not qualify as valid or ‘scientific’ anymore, the world in which such texts were made has changed – and so call into question the *unity* of established unities in the history of ideas, theories, concepts, texts, works, sciences.<sup>79</sup> Knowledge does not come in such unities, texts and theories elaborating upon each other, concepts gradually evolving, fields of knowledge expanding over time: it is produced in practices, maintained in discourse, dispersed in endless unconnected acts of expression, which do not form an orderly system but a changing field of relations beyond anyone’s control. To see how such practices, discourses, expressions and relations are *formed* is beyond the grasp of the so-called ‘history of ideas’; it calls for an ‘archeology of knowledge’ that lays bare the *rules of formation* by which, in a certain order of things, ideas and expressions are made possible and pack into theories, texts and fields of science.

These ideas of Foucault’s have been picked up by Dietrich Busse in his *Historische Semantik: Analyse eines Programms*. Busse’s claim – not exclusively Foucauldian – is that words do not have anything like a meaning independent of a context in which they are used. Therefore, the whole project of *Begriffsgeschichte* as championed by Koselleck is on the wrong track, because it has no theoretical notion of what a *concept* should be except that it is something expressed by a word, and so compiles histories of words that are supposed to stand for unitary concepts. Such an approach, according to Busse, can yield only a false idea of continuous development: it takes for granted that one author’s definition of a word is characteristic for how it can be used, and that such definitions constitute the history of a concept through a chain of language development. The historiography of *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* has little to do with historical semantics. In Busse’s words, it is a ‘mountain ridge tour’ along the track of traditional history of ideas, whereas the analysis of meanings over time calls for solid linguistic fieldwork. For a substitute, he suggests a ‘discourse history’ in which the choice of words is related to ‘discursive strategies’ to get some meaning across within the limits of what is

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<sup>79</sup> *L’Archéologie du Savoir*, pp. 12-3

possible and acceptable, and in which ‘knowledge’ is not a pool of facts but ‘[eine dynamische] Fähigkeit, aktuelle Wahrnehmungen, Kenntnisse sozialen Verhaltens, Kenntnisse der Welt, eigene Handlungserfahrungen so zu verknüpfen, daß mit hinreichender Sicherheit erwartbar eine Sinnrealisierung stattfindet’.<sup>80</sup>

The context, as Busse describes it, is not organized by invisible hands but by examples. In a more difficult and laden term, it has a paradigmatic structure. In making meaning, in following rules, people do not simply replicate extant patterns: they apply habits and examples to novel situations. For Busse, this means that there is a ‘margin’ of creativity to every (speech) act – but not more than that, because it is not in the speaker’s power to determine what others can understand.<sup>81</sup> The appearance of new examples can sometimes bring about drastic paradigmatic breaks, which affect or even supplant the whole discursive practice. More often, the practice changes gradually, by conscious or unconscious adaptation. In both cases, the change is not controlled by one individual’s discursive strategy. Such strategies exist *within* discursive practices, which Busse identifies with language games; one can suggest a change in the rules of the game, but that is still a move in the game.

Within a historical semantics as designed by Busse, ‘what figures in German philosophy as *Bildung*’ would mean something different from what it means to Koselleck and Gadamer. This is not obviously so. Koselleck, too, sees a discursive strategy behind the use of ‘*Bildung*’ (it ‘served an emancipatory interest’), and Busse, too, thinks that ideological terms have an open and evocative meaning. Busse endorses the ideas that ‘*Geschichte immer sprachlich erfaßte Geschichte ist und sich in Begriffen niederschlägt*’, that concepts ‘constitute reality’ and that a community’s ‘model of reality’ comes to expression in language games.<sup>82</sup> The difference is that paradigms do not only open up worlds of possibilities, but that they also exercise constraint. Words like *Bildung* can perform an expressive role in discursive practice, but they can also be used strategically in defence of a certain order of things. For Gadamer, such ideological uses would be mere ‘*Gerede*’; for Busse, they are fully competent forms of language use.

In his emphasis on competence, Busse diverges from Foucault. For Foucault, the rules of discursive formation are not in the head, but in the discourse: subjects do not make the rules, the rules make *them*. Busse, instead, holds a position that ideas have agents: if no one knows how to follow a rule, then there is no rule. What the rules are may not be of our own choosing, but what keeps them in force is not brainless replication but competent application. As with Koselleck, Busse demands of Foucault that his heuristics be linguistically adequate. I side with this demand; but for Busse, it means little more than the insight that words are deeds. What his position comes down to, then, is very much like Skinner’s demand for knowing what an author was doing in writing a particular text. In the same vein, one can also demand of Busse – who complains that historical semantics so far (1987) has not gone

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<sup>80</sup> *Historische Semantik*, p. 280

<sup>81</sup> *idem*, p. 202

<sup>82</sup> pp. 51, 218

beyond the *Principles of Semantics* formulated by Ullmann (1952) – that he take into account the developments in the philosophy of language since Davidson. That, I think, would get us one step out of the aporias of discourse theory *and* Davidsonian semantics; and one way to do this will be to align Busse's treatment of discourse and paradigms with my own thoughts on the role of ideals in reasoning.

The recognition of discursive strategies requires something more than knowing what kind of game is being played. For Busse, having a world means taking part in discursive practice: language games connect our perception of the situation, field of action, context of meaning, experience of the world and goal-directedness, so that 'in jeder einzelnen Handlung das Wirklichkeitsmodell der Handlungsgemeinschaft wenn nicht explizit, so doch fundamental zum Ausdruck kommt.'<sup>83</sup> One consequence he does not draw is that to attribute meaning to some speech act is to perceive it as *motivated* and *structured*, and so to perceive the agent's acts and beliefs as *coherent*. In fact, Busse does not address the issue of coherence. According to him, meaning is constituted in practice; so to demand for coherence would be to look in the head for what goes on in the world. But then, *how can you form a discursive strategy without having a coherent set of beliefs?* The coherence need not be there in your mind all the time: it is sufficient that you can give reasons. The insight that meanings and reasons are interdependent does not commit you to mentalism. Giving reasons, after all, is also a practice.

Rules and examples, Busse's building blocks of language games and paradigms, are not states of affairs: they point out how things *should be*. Disagreement about how things should be, according to Busse, is bound to end in 'this is as I do' or 'this is as it is always done'.<sup>84</sup> But that is because he regards language games as constitutive of 'models of reality' or 'forms of life', outside of which there is no meaning. The idea that such conflicts are inherent to competent language use, not marginal to it, does not seem to have dawned upon him. The best Busse can offer is to allow for the existence of 'language games to reflect upon other language games'. But those will not help to construct a model of interpretation for what is new and divergent, not if they, too, are governed by rules and examples. For the very fact that every speech act stands on itself, which leads Busse to reject the constancy of meaning as a fiction,<sup>85</sup> makes every interpretation something of a radical interpretation.

We need not reject the analysis in terms of discourse and paradigms, only the idea that they somehow comprise a conceptual scheme. It is quite true that the ingrained habits of everyday practice, the regularities that ward off ambiguity, and the examples we have of problem-solving exercise a constraint on what you can think up, or expect other people to understand. The very fact that we can recognize malaprops, infer swallowed syllables, hear the same words in different voices, and need less

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<sup>83</sup> p. 218

<sup>84</sup> p. 196

<sup>85</sup> p. 202: 'Das Fortdauern durch die Zeit ist bei sprachlichen Bedeutungen eine Fiktion wie der Bedeutungsbegriff selbst. Im Grunde dauert nichts fort, sondern in jeder kommunikativen Handlungen wird ein Stück Sinn konstituiert, das an diese eine Situation, diesen Kontext, diesen Handlungszweck gebunden ist.'

than the entire sentence is evidence enough of such normative structures. There is no clear boundary between where this structure is a natural environment, and where it is a strategic construct. The awareness that we constantly play at each other's expectations, perhaps benevolently but also strategically, should inform our attitude to the role of ideals in reasoning. Ideals are not something 'good'. They can blind us, they can be misused, they can turn out to be empty or go out of fashion for no obvious reason. But precisely in the development of some coherent discursive strategy, they are everywhere: in the attempt to attain some goal, but also to set some goal, to acquire new knowledge, to make ourselves understood. Provided that we replace the relatively static idea of a conceptual scheme with a more dynamic, and also more antagonistic picture of radical interpretation, something that Michiel Leezenberg has called a 'conflict view of language',<sup>86</sup> the notion of a 'constitutive ideal' is complementary with an analysis in terms of discourse and paradigms, and can at some points replace it.

What does this tell us about the meaning of *Bildung*? First of all, that there is no such thing as 'the meaning of *Bildung*'. There are, however, good reasons why someone would use a word like 'Bildung'. Within Busse's discourse history, it is hard to see such reasons as anything else than ideology. But in a conflict view of language, words like *Bildung* stand for essentially contested concepts. Two people can use it with entirely different meanings and still understand another. Or one can claim that it is an empty word and still understand what other people try to say by it. The demand for coherence in a theory of interpretation makes it possible to see the term as located in a network of inferential relations, some of which can be cancelled, others stressed in the game of giving and asking for reasons. So we end up with Koselleck's collective singulars after all, except that the choice of the *mot juste* depends upon conversational implicature rather than evocative potential. Since in a conflict view of language, we cannot expect the interlocutors to observe Grice's co-operative principle, but we can expect them to aim at optimal expression, the choice of the *mot juste* should be explained under an assumption of relevance rather than Gricean pragmatics. (This assumption, of course, is not a Scientific or a priori principle, unless we want to lay down laws and rules of conflict and transgression. It does, therefore, not commit us to use the quasi-scientific apparatus of Relevance Theory.)

Second, that the rise to prominence of the word 'Bildung' indicates a *change of strategy* rather than a shift of conceptual schemes. For some reason that they find difficult to make explicit, people find that the world has changed and that they must adapt their use of words to make themselves understood. Such changes can be slow and steady, or they can be like the butterfly effect from chaos theory: a Paris mob storms the Bastille and in few years, people around Europe find that things will never be the same again. I see no reason why the explanation of changes of strategy should give preference to

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<sup>86</sup> 'Power in Communication: Implications for the Semantics-Pragmatics Interface', in *Journal of Pragmatics* 34 (2002), pp. 893-908

either ‘processes’ or ‘events’. The important thing is that such changes of strategy change how people interact, how they define and pursue their ends and means, in what direction they seek for knowledge, how they use words. This does not mean that there is a divide across which the old and the new become incomprehensible to each other, only that they will sometimes find it hard to get along. (In some such cases, violence might be a better strategy than argument. That may not be optimally rational, but there is nothing incomprehensible about it.)

Third, that mapping the changes in strategy is an integral part of a theory of interpretation. In making explicit what you mean, the choice of words always carries certain implications and cancels others. In playing upon expectations created by prior use, drawing contrasts, establishing links, you are innovating upon the words in use. Busse writes: ‘Die Veränderlichkeit der Sprache ist Teil ihres Funktionierens, und muß mit diesem zusammen, in einer Theorie, erklärt werden.’<sup>87</sup> In constructing a coherent explanation of your choice of words, this is indeed what one does. The main difference between Busse’s view and mine, in this respect, is that he sees creativity as marginal and I see it as central.

Fourth, that it is *interaction*, rather than one particular ideal, insight, paradigm or epistemic break, that produces this change. We cannot say that the ideal of *Bildung* caused the rise of modern linguistics, or that modern linguistics shaped the ideal of *Bildung*; but ‘*Bildung*’ is a good denominator for the conceptions of how things should be followed by Humboldt and Schlegel. It did not determine what became of modern linguistics, Humboldt’s academic reform, or Schlegel’s romantic revolt; but it was part of their strategies at seeking knowledge, changing the world and making themselves understood. After that, there came professors of linguistics, the world was changed, and ‘*Bildung*’ carried new connotations.

Fifth, that ideals and strategies not only figure in theories of (historical, linguistic) interpretation but that they also support them. After all, theories too must make themselves understood, and express their findings as adequately as possible. So we can read scientific theories as expressions of a certain ideal of ‘scientificity’ in which some things are relevant and others must be left out. Also, we find Donald Davidson supporting his philosophy of language with a ‘constitutive ideal of rationality’, and Hans-Georg Gadamer making every step in understanding a step in *Bildung*. The problem, I repeat, is not that such ideals are there but that they sometimes lead to distortions, as when Davidson thinks that everyone shares his own standards of rationality or Gadamer bores his readers with conservative talk talk. These distortions need not invite global skepticism; they only show there is something wrong with the strategy.

And sixth, that as the ideal of *Bildung* informs historiographies and philosophies of language, the question of what *Bildung* means becomes a metahistorical and a metaphilosophical question. How are such histories and theories structured by the choice of words? This is a question I will address in the

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<sup>87</sup> *Historische Semantik*, p. 22

next chapter, in a discussion of Rorty's and White's ideas about philosophy and history. The point of stressing the inferential connections between words is that such choice is not resolved by 'aesthetics' or 'narrative structure', as Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit have it, but that the creative use of language in history and philosophy is a polemic and reasoned use, which depends upon strategies for getting meaning across and draws on, as much as develops ideals.

The result is a picture in which the question *what does Bildung mean?* indeed becomes *why Bildung?* It is a picture in which the choice of such words is settled by expectations created by prior use, by strategies at work in a discourse, and by inferential connections that structure one's statements. It is also a picture in which understanding becomes a process of Bildung. As we learn how to do things with words, we acquire a skill that is sometimes like playing chess, making calculations and guessing at each other's strategy, sometimes more like dancing, moving in measure and minding not to step on someone's feet. The strategies we follow do not come as readymades: they are shaped by the skills we learn, planned against the opposition we encounter, oriented by our vague conceptions of how things should be.

Thinking with history figures in the formation of strategies and ideals at various stages. It figures in the implications of the words we use, which are contained not in their etymologies, but in the expectations that come from prior use. It figures in disagreement, when we have to figure out what is particular about our views and therefore put their *newness* into question. It figures in our being uneasy with how things are, and so asking how they *got* that way and why they couldn't be *different*. It figures directly in reminiscence and indirectly in documents, which have to be made sense of time and again. In a way, we are thinking with history when we find our way through a historical city centre. But all this does not give history a *binding* force over us. History is not *how things should be*, it is simply some stuff that *happened*. A similar thing can be said about language. Without language, we could not play the game of giving and asking for reasons; we could not have ideals, because we would not even have *meanings*. But in the sense that language 'creates the world' or 'writes man', or even 'carries our culture', language does not exist.

#### 4. The Choice of Words and the Lessons of History: 'Metahistory' and 'Strong Poetry'

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The following chapter is concerned with how ideals, and an ideal of *Bildung* in particular, are operative in the choice of words of the historian. It compares Richard Rorty's view of the history of ideas as a chain of attempts at self-definition with Hayden White's, who views the historical text as a literary artefact. In both these perspectives, moral considerations prevail over epistemic ones: Rorty and White share a poetical ideal of self-invention that leads them to treat *wie es wirklich gewesen* with condescension. White, whose work on historical interpretation is much more elaborate and coherently articulated, ends up treating history as brute matter upon which the historian imposes a conceptual scheme, as if it were a dungeon of invention. Rorty does not fall prey to this schematism, but fails to develop a true alternative: rather, he gets caught between Gadamer and White. The conclusion is that both treat language as a sort of magic, and that their poetical ideals fail to provide a solid theory of creativity in reasoning. Accordingly, in so far as *Bildung* gets a meaning in their heuristics, it must get a different meaning.

In part I, I exposed a tension in Rorty's work between *thinking with history* and *philosophical therapy*. The argument of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was, roughly, that we should get rid of the 'traditional' concerns of philosophy, which are an invented tradition anyhow, to engage in a more open conversation with the past and the present. In later work, particularly in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty has developed the doctrine that you create yourself by telling stories. Philosophical theories, histories, and histories of philosophy have no claim to privilege: they are stories among others. This position presents itself as the natural successor to *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. For the image of the Mirror of Nature, according to Rorty, is one obstacle towards a liberal society: the idea that knowledge requires a foundation is nothing else than a yearning for a knock-down argument, and once we got ourselves rid of that conversation-stopper, we are one step closer to listening to each other instead of using symbolic or physical violence.

Immediately, one question pops up. *How to choose which story to tell?* This is of course a neverending question, because Rorty does not allow for conclusive answers; but that does not make it an arbitrary guess, for what we are depends on it. If nobody finds anything distinctive in our words and deeds, 'one will not really have had an I at all. One's creations, and one's self, will just be better or worse

instances of familiar types'.<sup>88</sup> This predicament should prompt us towards a position that Rorty calls *liberal irony*, in which we realize that there is no last say, that we cannot choose the things that make us choose, and that the creativity with which we invent new stories is perhaps the most contingent factor of all. In Rorty's ideal liberal society, the ideal citizen is the 'Strong Poet' who constantly refreshes the language in which we create ourselves. From this position, there is no sense in writing 'histories of philosophy' as if these revolve around eternal questions. But there is good sense in writing history, even intellectual history, for the sake of our edification.

For Rorty is drawing strong morals from the past. The insight that our ideas and practices are historically contingent is only one among them. German Idealism may have burdened us with the *idée-fixe* of 'eternal questions' in philosophy, but it has also taught us that the truth is not out there, but made by us. The Enlightenment has taught us that we are answerable to other people only. Romanticism has taught us to put our trust in art rather than science, and to create ourselves as individuals. These morals may not be moral laws, but they serve as reasons for the kind of story Rorty wants to tell. As an approach to history and the writing of history, Rorty's ironism is anything but haphazard storytelling. Rather, it reflects his own ideal of edification in its method and its elements, and so gives as good an example of ideals at work as one could wish: a story that is shaped by an ideal of *Bildung*, results in a redefinition of *Bildung* as edification, and contains an account of the role of metaphors in intellectual history and how they are to be understood – which is also one way to answer the question, *what does Bildung mean?*

John Zammito has called Rorty's views on historiography 'decisionistic' because they make history obey the will of its author, who is of course ironically aware of the contingency of his own position but sticks to it nonetheless.<sup>89</sup> Zammito's problem with Rorty's way of drawing lessons from history is that it will always make us know *better* than the mighty dead, will make us value their achievement from our present concerns, and reduce the past to a second-rate version of the present. So that the question emerges: what does he need the past for? It is true that Rorty sees edification less as going with the flow of history than Gadamer does, and so is more concerned with the challenges of the present than with *Erhebung zur Allgemeinheit*. To be a 'Strong Poet', in the phrase which Rorty borrows from Harold Bloom, is to live under an 'anxiety of influence'.<sup>90</sup> What makes our storytelling less than haphazard is that nature causes us to have largely true beliefs; and if this principle of Davidson's also holds for Rorty's way of drawing lessons from history, then effectively Rorty is describing the history of ideas as a process of natural selection. Strong Poetry, then, would be a fortunate form of deviation, and variety a condition for growth.

The image that Rorty himself uses is from Nietzsche: he describes the history of ideas as a 'mobile

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<sup>88</sup> *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 24

<sup>89</sup> 'Rorty, "Historicism", and the Practice of History: A Polemic', in *Rethinking History* 10 (2006), No. 1, pp. 9–47; p. 23

<sup>90</sup> *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 24



army of metaphors’, that come up in great minds for no particular reason, and loose their effect upon the imagination as they become more generally accepted as part of the common-sense world.

For all we know, or should care, Aristotle’s metaphorical use of *ousia*, Saint Paul’s metaphorical use of *agapē*, and Newton’s metaphorical use of *gravitas*, were the results of cosmic rays scrambling some crucial neurons in their respective brains, or... some odd episodes in infancy... it hardly matters how the trick was done. The results were *marvellous*. Such things had never been around before.<sup>91</sup>

Conceptual history, under this description, is like a canon of Strong Poets. There remains, however, a nomological slack between the intellectual Darwinism and the ideal of Strong Poetry. In the one view, history is a rational reconstruction of how the past produced the present; in the other, history is a form of art. But in both views, the choice of which story to tell is guided by moral considerations: to draw lessons from history, or to determine who you are, is not to have some fact forced upon you by the world, or to make a ‘disinterested’ aesthetic judgement. No matter with how much irony you view your choice as something caused, it remains a choice.

The problem of how historiography is related to moral and artistic considerations has been the lifelong occupation of Hayden White. In the Introduction to *Metahistory*, White distinguishes between four modes of emplotment, explanation and ideology that underlay different ways of writing history, and four tropes that are typical for them.<sup>92</sup> These are:

<i>Mode of Emplotment</i>	<i>Mode of Argument</i>	<i>Mode of Ideology</i>	<i>Trope</i>
Romance	Formist	Anarchist	Metaphor
Comedy	Organicist	Conservative	Synecdoche
Tragedy	Mechanist	Radical	Metonymy
Satire	Contextualist	Liberal	Irony

The reason that White sticks to fourfold divisions is that he sees an intrinsic relation between them. For instance, for a conservative, the status quo and the history that produced it are quite as they should be, and so the past is a story that ends well, perhaps a comedy of errors, sometimes a sad story, but one in which everything is organically part of the whole, and so is described in the trope that takes the part for the whole, i.e. synecdoche. For a radical, the now is wrong, and attempts to make a better world have failed tragically against ‘the system’ and other impersonal forces – a story in which every cause of evil points to some other cause of evil, in a chain of metonymies. And so on.

The controversial point of White’s metahistory is not that historians tell stories or that they use figurative language, but that there is ‘no escaping the determinative power of figurative language-use.’<sup>93</sup> It is only because conservatives can ‘cast history in the synecdotic mode’ that they can write

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<sup>91</sup> *idem*, p. 17

<sup>92</sup> The first three columns are from the scheme in *Metahistory*, p. 23. The fourth is easily added.

<sup>93</sup> ‘Historicism, History, and the Imagination’, in *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 105

histories as comedies, and so explain the past from their conservative perspective. Without a plot, there is no history, only a meaningless sequence of events; no formal language can replace it. But without tropes, there is no plot. Unfortunately, the ‘tropology’ that this should lead to is also the weakest point of his metahistory. White has nothing faintly resembling a structural analysis of how tropes function in a language, discourse, or text: no list of metaphors used by anarchists, no categorical types of part-part and part-whole relations, no cognitive semantics. Not even convincing examples. He never subjects a trope in a text to close reading, but relies upon Hegel’s analysis of literary forms in the *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik*, and typically offers descriptions like this:

The Organicist apprehension of the historical process offered by Herder was still present in Ranke’s work as the Metaphor by which the process as a whole had to be comprehended. But it had been sublimated into the Comic plot structure.<sup>94</sup>

Such diagnoses are fully ad hoc: Ranke’s style is described as ‘synecdotical’ not because he uses more synecdoche than Michelet or Tocqueville, but because he sees the whole contained in its parts, and uses the metaphor of organic development, which according to White is a synecdoche. Poor proof that there is ‘no escaping the determinative power of figurative language-use’.

Drop this, and you get an interesting analysis of how the choice of stories and *mots justes* reflects moral commitment and explanatory strategy. For White, the mode of argument is one way to explain the choices the historian made – what parts of the record were included or left out, in what sequence they were treated, and what collative or container concepts were used. But ‘History remains in the state of conceptual anarchy in which the natural sciences existed in the sixteenth century, when there were as many conceptions of “the scientific enterprise” as there were metaphysical positions.’<sup>95</sup> So a conservative will sooner accept a story which explains even the bad things as part of the organic whole, whereas a radical will seek for laws that explain why the world is as bad as it is (and why attempts for the better have failed). Also, to make your mode of argument convincing, it must point to a certain conclusion, and so your story will end well, end badly, or remains open-ended: it will be a romance, comedy, tragedy, or satire.

There are of course more sophisticated styles of writing available, but it is White’s grudge against the profession that history has not kept up with the development in literary form since romanticism and naturalism: ‘when historians claim that their discipline is a combination of science and art, they generally mean that it is a combination of *late-nineteenth century* social science and *mid-nineteenth-century* art.’<sup>96</sup> As matters are, the historical record does not force a certain style or line of argument upon us – and therefore, White concludes, ‘the only grounds for preferring one [vision of history] over another are *moral* and *aesthetic* ones.’<sup>97</sup> This insight, White hopes, will revitalize history rather than

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<sup>94</sup> *Metahistory*, p. 176

<sup>95</sup> *idem*, p. 13

<sup>96</sup> ‘The Burden of History’, in *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 43

<sup>97</sup> *Metahistory*, p. 433

kill it. In *Metahistory*, he describes how the ‘Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe’ died out as historians came to view the past as a meaningless sequence of events, which Burckhardt captured in a satire of futile struggle and which Nietzsche felt as burden to get rid of. But for White, the ironical insight that history is a chaos which has a meaning only in the telling is no reason for *moral* irony. Instead, it is an urge to do our thinking for ourselves. Herman Paul, quoting White’s essay ‘The Politics of Historical Interpretation’, describes White’s position as an ‘existentialist humanism’:

Only a “kind of meaninglessness” of reality (that is, an awareness that all meaning associated with particular persons or events is *superimposed upon*, rather than *found in* reality) “...can goad human beings to make their lives different for themselves and their children, which is to say, to endow their lives with a meaning for which they alone are fully responsible.”<sup>98</sup>

This ‘existentialist humanism’ can be read as a comment upon the ideal of *Bildung* that informed much of the historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe. White explains the ‘conceptual anarchy’ in the field of history as an escape from the aporias of Enlightenment historiography, which sought to give its belief in progress a scientific basis but found evil and stupidity so prevalent that the ‘laws of history’ would sooner be like *le canaille sera toujours canaille* or *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*.<sup>99</sup> From a conception of science as the discovery of general laws, the ‘artistic’ element in the historical imagination saved historians from seeing *toujours la même chose*. Once, then, this must have meant both a conceptual innovation and a moral impulse. White’s grudge is that historians have stuck to this conception of science, and of art as its opposite, and of history in between. For despite all their historical imagination, historians in the nineteenth century and after still believed that they were giving an artistic presentation of *wie es wirklich gewesen*, finding meaning in the past rather than giving it. They all viewed their own style as ‘historical realism’. And that, as White presents it, is a Myth of the Given.

Historical accounts purport to be verbal models, or icons, of specific segments of the historical process. But such models are needed because the documentary record does not figure forth an unambiguous image of the structure of events attested in them. In order to figure “what *really* happened” in the past, therefore, the historian must *prefigure* as a possible object of knowledge the whole set of events reported in the documents. This prefigurative act is *poetic* inasmuch as it is precognitive and precritical in the economy of the historian’s own consciousness. It is also poetic insofar as it is constitutive of the structure that will subsequently be imaged in the verbal model offered by the historian as a representation and explanation of “what *really* happened” in the past. But it is constitutive not only of a domain which the historian can treat as a possible object of (mental) perception. It is also constitutive of the *concepts* he will use to *identify the objects* that inhabit that domain and to *characterize the kinds of relationships* they can sustain with one another. In the poetic act which precedes the formal analysis of the field, the historian

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<sup>98</sup> Herman Paul, *Masks of Meaning. Existentialist Humanism in Hayden White’s Philosophy of History*, p. 157

<sup>99</sup> *Metahistory*, pp. 64-9. The phrases are Voltaire’s.

both creates his object of analysis and predetermines the modality of the conceptual strategies he will use to explain it.<sup>100</sup>

In this paragraph, White does not with so many words describe the verbal model as a model of ‘inner speech’ (as Sellars does in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*)<sup>101</sup>, but he is describing the domain of perceptual objects and concepts as something to be *constituted* rather than *Given*. The ‘precognitive’ and ‘precritical’ predetermination, to be sure, is not absolute: in vivid histories, there is a struggle between the historian and his material, between the constraints of the model and the demands on the level of narrative and ideology. (Michelet writes a romance of French History but loses belief in the happy end; Tocqueville writes a tragedy about the rise of the masses despite his liberal convictions.) Interestingly enough, White compares the predicament of the historian to that of the jungle linguist, whose ‘first problem is to distinguish among the lexical, grammatical, and syntactic elements of the field. Only then can he undertake to interpret what any given configuration... means.’<sup>102</sup> So White is not saying that nothing has happened unless it is narrated, only that it becomes a history of meaningful facts on the semantic level, where the object of knowledge is subjected to philosophical-ideological considerations. This is why he claims that ‘every history contains within it the elements of a full-blown philosophy of history’.<sup>103</sup>

It is easy enough to reject White’s account of prefiguration as conceptual relativism. It certainly is. But prefiguration is not something that goes away if you reject the Myth of the Given and the very idea of a Conceptual Scheme. (Sellars himself still talks of conceptual schemes, and his idea that verbal performance provides the model for ‘inner speech’ also presupposes some prefiguration.) Somehow, we manage to find the *mot juste* that allows the hearer to infer our beliefs and intentions, and this process goes largely unreflected. The problem with White is that he turns language into magic: through some mysterious ‘poetic’ force, we are able to see objects and relations endowed with meaning. But such objects and relations are not given any more in the words than in the world. Using a concept is a matter of competence: it commits one to making related assertions, or canceling inferences. Taken at face value, tropes are literally meaningless. It is only because we have inferential capacities that we can make sense of them (even in unreflected use, as in malapropism, dead metaphor, or children’s unintended metaphors).

The very idea of a conceptual scheme makes it possible for White to be radically skeptic about meaning in the events themselves. Such skepticism is warranted with regard to some all-encompassing entity called ‘history’ or ‘the past’, but it is not warranted with regard to what people were *doing*. The

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<sup>100</sup> idem, pp. 30-1

<sup>101</sup> *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, § XV. There is no reason to believe that White had read Sellars at the time. The ‘poetic act’, of course, will not be found with Sellars. The idea that the ‘relationships concepts can sustain with one another’ depend on being made explicit, however, resembles the doctrine of ‘semantic inferentialism’ that Brandom developed from the work of Sellars.

<sup>102</sup> idem.

<sup>103</sup> idem, p. 428

documents and the physical remains reach the historian already endowed with meaning, because the people who produced them were operating with meaning. Not just historiography, but history itself is laden with ideals. Their meaning is not our meaning, and they may have been unaware of what they were doing, but they need not be transubstantiated into history by some poetic prefigurative act because their predicament is essentially the same as ours: finding out what they were up to. While denying that there are such things as plain given facts, White gets caught in another Myth of the Given by treating historical data as 'lexical elements'.

Frank Ankersmit, in *Sublime Historical Experience*, has used the word *Bildung* in relation to a White-style metahistory: the experience of history as something chaotic, overwhelming, different, and never fully grasped in words, should teach the historian that it is not the facts but the presentation that matters. The facts, Ankersmit holds, are uncontroversial; but some can put history in a different light, convey the fierceness and otherness of the past, which is what historians *should* do. This is worse than White, because Ankersmit leaves nothing to be reasoned about: the facts speak for themselves, the conclusions drawn from them belong to the representation, and the representation is a work of art, in which inspiration and taste prevail over argument. But there is not much that White leaves to be reasoned about either. He disconnects meaning from reality; and this leaves little else to inspire moral deliberation than aesthetic considerations. White's argument that any intrinsic 'meaning of history' would cripple responsible moral deliberation can be stood on its head: the idea that what people did in the past bore no intrinsic relation to what followed is equally debilitating, and if the idea of progress reduces the present to a second-rate version of the future, action without an orientation to the future is unthinkable, and so is moral deliberation. So I see little difference between Ankersmit's 'Bildung' and White's 'existentialist humanism': both lock you up in your own imagination, beyond scrutiny, pruning your fingernails, love it or hate it.

Enough bashing. Metahistory has its merits. The writing of history is an excellent case of the choice of words, because the historian's language is extraordinarily well-formed and reflected, but not formalized beyond the conventions for footnotes. This is particularly problematic in the choice of container concepts, which generalize over events but cannot be motivated with formal laws. I agree with White that this choice is not motivated merely by 'common sense' but also by ideology. But the point that he misses is that past events, and the historical record, already involved a choice of words. In this regard, history is also an excellent case of the role of ideals in reasoning. For *that* choice of words was a creative act in its own right, a struggle to get to the point, why something was done, what was going on, what part to play. The historian, with the benefit of hindsight, can laugh or weep about past mistakes but cannot dispel such choices as meaningless, because they were constitutive of his source material. (Together with physical remains and, not unimportantly, *other histories*.) What he does is selecting things to quote, describe, and comment on, and fitting them to his argument. This is, effectively, a decision on what is relevant, even when it is spontaneous or haphazard. In a network of cross-references, meanings are ascribed, reasons made explicit, earlier statements specified. It is an

exaggerated claim that every historical text reflects ‘a full-blown philosophy of history’ – that is to demand that a conceptual scheme be imposed upon the world, instead of words put to use. But the historian’s work must be perceived as motivated and structured, and this is a requirement that goes beyond ‘representing the facts faithfully’ into the realm of norms, reasons and ideals.

It is tempting to compare White’s fourfold divisions with the four genres in Rorty’s essay ‘The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres’. However, Rorty’s distinction is one of scope and method, rather than style and ideology. The four genres do not each represent a full-blown philosophy of history, but supplement each other. Also, they are ways of writing the history of *philosophy*. Still, the distinction comes forth from a similar view on history writing as moral deliberation, and Rorty’s later position on narrativism and the role of metaphors in intellectual history comes all the closer to White’s metahistory. The main difference is that Rorty does not assume the past to be meaningless. Nonetheless, after *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, one may wonder whether Rorty’s own conception of Bildung is not closer akin to Ankersmit’s than to Gadamer’s, and how this would affect his interpretation of how people in the past used the term.

The four genres are Historical Reconstruction, Rational Reconstruction, *Geistesgeschichte*, and Intellectual History. On a small scale, Rorty opposes *Rational Reconstructions*, that elaborate positions of dead thinkers into (e.g. ‘Kantian’) answers to present philosophical issues, to *Historical Reconstructions*, that rather describe what authors were doing in their particular time and place. To John Zammito’s outrage, he stresses the relative independence of these two approaches: a good rational reconstruction is one that gets out of the past what is worthwhile (say, as in Strawson’s *The Bounds of Sense*), adopting, if necessary, descriptions in which the dead would not have recognized themselves. The distinction is one, Rorty has it, of obeying or ignoring Skinner’s maxim that

no agent can eventually be said to have meant or done something which he could never be brought to accept as a description of what he had meant or done.<sup>104</sup>

For Zammito, this makes rational reconstruction a way of drawing justification from the past without letting it speak for itself. He sees Rorty’s essay as confusing two questions: ‘first, what role should history play in the self-conception of philosophy, and, second, more primordially, how can history be philosophically (or at the very least methodologically) grounded?’<sup>105</sup> In this confusion, historical reconstruction is left to add a touch of honesty to our dealing with the past, but what is relevant is determined in rational reconstructions, and on a larger scale in encompassing *Geistesgeschichten*.

This third genre, *Geistesgeschichte*, is the most poetic of Rorty’s four genres: it is the canon-forming hero-tale that combines rational and historical reconstruction in an evaluation of now-and-then

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<sup>104</sup> ‘The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres’, in Richard Rorty, J.B. Schneewindt, Quentin Skinner (eds.), *Philosophy in History*, pp. 50, 54. The quotation is from Skinner, ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas’; in the revised version in *Meaning and Context*, it is on p. 48.

<sup>105</sup> ‘Rorty, “Historicism”, and the Practice of History: A Polemic’, p. 13

philosophical concerns, an evaluation that at best does justice to the mighty mistaken dead in why some issues mattered for them, but still sorts out what is worth preserving, passing some things over, rejecting other concerns openly as *Scheinprobleme*. It is global where reconstructions are local, and as an evaluation that matters more the more it is inventive, it is inherently idiosyncratic. (Rorty's examples are Hegel, Heidegger, Foucault, but also Blumenberg, MacIntyre and Reichenbach.) In this, it is opposed to the traditional history of philosophy that Rorty rejects – the 'doxography' that tries to give a new meaning to the same old canon – because there, historians 'know their chapter headings in advance'. But it also stands in opposition to what Rorty offers as an alternative 'fourth genre', *Intellectual History*, which 'consists of descriptions of what the intellectuals were up to at a given time, and of their interaction with the rest of society... - what choices one had of vocabularies, hopes, friends, enemies, and careers.'<sup>106</sup> Unlike *Geistesgeschichte*, intellectual history is not concerned with what thinkers still speak to us, or what philosophy should be like. It does for *Geistesgeschichte* on a global level what historical reconstruction on a local level: adding a touch of honesty. But although intellectual history seems the most appropriate genre for historiography of philosophy after one has, like Rorty, abandoned the belief in 'philosophy as a natural kind', Rorty's division of labour makes it rather secondary to *Geistesgeschichte*, a necessary correction, an aid in canon choice:

what we need is to see the history of philosophy as the story of people who made splendid but largely unsuccessful attempts to ask the questions which we ought to be asking. [...] The more intellectual history we can get, of the kind which does not worry about what questions are philosophical and who counts as a philosopher, the better our chances of having a suitably large list of candidates for a canon. The more various canons we can adopt – the more *Geistesgeschichten* we have at hand – the more likely we are to reconstruct, first rationally and then historically, interesting thinkers.<sup>107</sup>

And of course, by Rorty's own standards, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is *Geistesgeschichte*. It is this hierarchical arrangement that outrages Zammito. What particularly vexes him is the condescending tone with which Rorty compares intellectual history with an ethnological report, which does not impose a judgement on the 'truth and importance' of past utterances and so does not put them 'in a form that allows confrontation with the way the world is.'<sup>108</sup> Whereas you would expect some kind of principle of charity that finds these utterances right as much as possible, a history of philosophy that finds something true and important in the past, for Rorty, is bound to 'filter out the sentences which are not worth translating, while being conscientiously anachronistic in translating the remainder.'<sup>109</sup> The past only matters if it matters to *us*. As the introduction to *Philosophy in History* presents it, without such a confrontation, the historian would 'abandon the idea of intellectual

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<sup>106</sup> 'The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres', p. 68

<sup>107</sup> *idem*, p. 74

<sup>108</sup> 'Introduction' to *Philosophy in History*, p. 4. The Introduction appears under the collective signature of the editors (Rorty, Schneewind, Skinner), but Zammito is right that it unmistakably betrays Rorty's hand.

<sup>109</sup> *idem*, p. 7

progress' and be left 'a miscellany of self-contained traditions.'<sup>110</sup>

In the historiography of philosophy, then, Rorty assigns a constitutive role to the genre of *Geistesgeschichte* to various effects: it confronts the past with the latest standards of knowledge, it sets the goals of enquiry, and it brings about continuity in the history of ideas that does not exist *per se*. An illustration of this can be found in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, which turns Kant's Copernican turn into a premonition of Sellars' rejection of the Myth of the Given, draws the conclusion that people are responsible to other people only and not to something external, and makes it, together with Hegel's philosophy of history, a massive conceptual shift in the course towards intellectual progress. But do such *Geistesgeschichten*, which Rorty desires to be 'epic' and 'radically innovative'<sup>111</sup>, really perform a constitutive role? I share Zammito's doubts about this. The idea that canons are indispensable reeks both of conservatism and of belletrism. It seems to me that the concept of *Geistesgeschichte* gets caught between the demand for historical consciousness and the demand to invent your own history, between Gadamer and White.

(Zammito's conclusion, for that matter, is that where Rorty diverges from Gadamer, Rorty is wrong; this conclusion comes with a plea for 'thick description' in historical reconstruction. The following judgement is of interest:

In Rorty's 'new and more interesting way of expressing ourselves'... the very thought of self-risk has evaporated. Nevertheless, Rorty claims that he achieves his phraseology of 'edification' by reworking Gadamer's term *Bildung*. Here is an instance in which 'translation' into his own terms devastates any possibility of interpretation adequate to the matter at stake. What Rorty misses is that 'the entire thrust of [Gadamerian] hermeneutics is... "commensuration"'.<sup>112</sup>)

Two questions. How generally applicable is the concept of *Geistesgeschichte*, and what is its relation to Strong Poetry?

To start with the first, there is no obvious reason why *Geistesgeschichte* occurs only in the historiography of philosophy. Rorty claims that physicists do not appeal to the history of their discipline as philosophers do ('If you can synthesize steroids, you do not require historical legitimation') and that this points to a '*prima facie* difference between the history of science and the history of philosophy'.<sup>113</sup> Still, one expects *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* to count as *Geistesgeschichte*. Also, the claim that 'Canon-formation is not an issue in the history of science'<sup>114</sup> is markedly counterfactual: science textbooks are full of ancestral heads. The reason for such claims seems to be rather that Rorty finds science irrelevant to our self-definition, or at least less relevant than

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<sup>110</sup> *idem*, pp. 1-2

<sup>111</sup> 'The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres', p. 72

<sup>112</sup> 'Rorty, "Historicism", and the Practice of History: A Polemic', p. 32. The quote is from Georgia Warnke, 'Hermeneutics and social science: a Gadamerian critique of Rorty', in *Inquiry* 28 (1985), pp. 339 – 357; p. 356

<sup>113</sup> 'The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres', p. 57

<sup>114</sup> *idem*, p. 58



politics and art. That does not yet say anything about the need for Geistesgeschichte in politics, art, social science, economics, linguistics, or literature. The point of Geistesgeschichte seems not to be legitimization of research programmes in philosophy departments, but grand sweeping judgements about what is relevant. The question, after all, is how 'Geistesgeschichte as canon-formation' can make us more interesting people.

I have two objections. The first is simple. To ask for a canon to make things relevant is like asking for an encompassing conceptual scheme. The second is complex. It turns history into Strong Poetry. To single out some words or deeds from the past as uniquely relevant is to signal some break in the course of history, *and* to draw a line from then to now. Even in shaping history to the demands of the present, canon-formation invites conceptual relativism: the elements of the canon must have made a difference, produced a different world. But to emphasize this difference both makes them more important (as making a difference) and less so (for being more remote from our concerns, and even beyond comprehension). The very fact that these are *ethical* considerations for the *writers* of history does not so much *warrant* narrativism as *discredit* canon-formation: the morals are not the lessons of history, but of the historian, and what is understandable about them is determined by his morals. Then, history can do nothing but confirm your own fancies, and canons become poems including history.

That brings us to the second question. Rorty does not expect historians to write poems including history; but he does have a notion of conceptual change that crucially involves Strong Poetry. It does so in two ways: Rorty presents *conceptual innovations* as the emergence of new metaphors, which are metaphorical precisely because they are unfamiliar, and die off into literalness as they become common wisdom; and he makes the *self* depend upon the 'final vocabulary' in which we define ourselves, beyond which there is no appeal, and which also consist of metaphors that in due time become ineffective commonplace. It is not clear why the one type of metaphor ultimately becomes 'common wisdom' and the other 'ineffective commonplace', and in the latter case, how to define yourself in metaphors that are effective only as long as they are unfamiliar. But it doesn't matter much, because Rorty's identification of *metaphorical* with *unfamiliar* is plain nonsense. It makes inexplicable how metaphors can be read and heard without extra processing time, how something that emerges as a 'fortunate deviation' in the mind of the speaker can produce a similar fortunate deviation in the mind of the hearer, and how metaphors can be paraphrased, transformed or token at face value.<sup>115</sup> Also, it makes self-definition inscrutable in a way which turns people into poems. I, personally, would not want to be a poem.

What *does* matter is how this informs Rorty's translation of Bildung into edification. If conceptual

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<sup>115</sup> Rorty claims to 'see the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical in the way Davidson sees it: not as a distinction between two sorts of meaning, nor as distinction between two sorts of interpretation, but as a distinction between familiar and unfamiliar uses of noises and marks' (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 17); but that is also dubious, because Rorty denies metaphor any literal meaning, whereas Davidson says that metaphor has *only* a literal meaning, and what makes it a *metaphor* belongs to the domain of *use*, like joking and asking questions, which leaves the literal meaning intact.

history consists of dead metaphor, and the task of *Geistesgeschichte* is to make it relevant anew, then one would expect *Geisteshistoriker* to revive dead metaphor. How to do this trick? In *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Rorty defends a 'strong misreading' of texts which 'is able to get more out of the text than its author or its intended could have possibly found there' by imposing 'a vocabulary... which may have nothing to do with any vocabulary used in the text or by its author, and seeing what happens. [...] The strong misreader does not care about the distinction between discovery and creation, between making and finding.'<sup>116</sup> The translation of *Bildung* into edification, Zammito judges, is such a strong misreading. I am not sure, however, whether it has anything to do with reviving dead metaphor.

What happens? Nothing very dramatic. Edification carries some of the implications *Bildung* has, and cancels others. Rorty says: be a good citizen, be autonomous, make yourself useful but keep your free judgement, take an interest in language, history and art, be critical, achieve your country. Nothing new about that. He may have his own ideas about how to do it, but there was not all that much consensus about that among the long dead either. There is a blurring of the distinction between discovery and creation, in that some of the more anachronistic elements of his translation can still be claimed to be 'implicit' in the thought of Kant, Hegel and the Romantics. But that will hardly make one attribute new beliefs to them, let alone confuse their views with Rorty's.

The point is that making such implications explicit, *and cancelling others*, is normal competent language use. We make such translations all the time. All the words we use can carry some implications we had not thought of, or wish to avoid, and more so with general terms, interpreted over a distance of time, space, background knowledge and interest. But that is not a 'benign competition with the metaphor maker', it is a conflict. Speaking, indeed, is a wager.

The conclusion, to end this chapter, is that Rorty's translation of *Bildung* into his own vocabulary is precisely where he gets stuck between thinking with history and philosophical therapy, between drawing lessons from the past and Strong Poetry, between Gadamer and White. Translating it into an ideal of radical poetic self-definition, he is *using* it to argue for canon-formation and intellectual heritage, and *doing* this by elaborating upon past doctrines. Also, it leads him to treat language as magic, and people as poems. These are implications that must be cancelled. There is, however, more to be said about poetical and stylistic considerations in the choice of words; and since this supplies a motive for my own talk of *Bildung*, I will do so in the next chapter.

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<sup>116</sup> 'Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism', in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, pp. 151-2

## 5. The Uses of Bildung, or How to do Things with Ideals

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What are ideals, and how do they work? I cannot say I have answered this question. The discussion about what Bildung means has shown ideals at work in theories of interpretation, but although theories of interpretation are part of reality, they are not physically real enough to count as ‘empirical evidence’. Also, ideals are not things like chairs. Not that I believe chairs are *real*, as far as I know that chairs are made of components, design, production processes, metal or wood or plastics, quarks, and lots of interatomic space, none of which say ‘chair’ in the language of thought... but I can count them, produce them, design them, and sit in them. What can I do with ideals? All that this critique of extant philosophies has shown is that words can be used to all kinds of ends, that some words serve to make explicit how things should be and how one would be understood, and that such talk is part of what people do all the time. The talk of ‘strategies’ and ‘uses’ in Part II seems to contradict the claim from Part I that ideals perform a ‘constitutive role’, whatever that may mean. It doesn’t. This chapter last is devoted to reconciling the two.

The first part of the argument here is an anthropological one. It goes *against* a culturalistic view of ideals as part of a coherent system of meanings (or ‘forms of life’) by stressing that culture is not an explanation but a problem: cultural constancy is a no more natural condition than change, and incoherence generally more distinctive than coherence. The use of ideals is not an available strategy in a given system of meanings and values: that picture makes too much of the cool reason of the actors, *and* of the Dark Gods of the native soil. Nor do ideals create coherence where there is none. Rather, they prompt moves in the game of giving and asking for reasons that license some inferences, cancel others, leave different ones open. This is not willy-nilly arguing: what is at stake is who you are, what you are up to, what you mean. That does not make ideals something *good*, for they can be used as much as abused, critical, conventional or vacuous, but at any rate (so I will argue) indispensable.

This flows into the second part of the argument, which is more linguistic in nature. It gives the slogan ‘language does not exist’ a twist by stating that language competence as a formal capacity, indeed, does not exist outside this blood-serious game of reason-giving. But neither does that game explain itself. Both the capacity for inferences and for grammatical constructions of competent language users are complex beyond transparency, and making them transparent and violating their rules go together. Both capacities may stem from human nature, evolution, experience, ingrained reactions and the like, but that does not tell how to use them. Language creativity, argument, interpretation, and the verbalisation of experience all show us groping with our mind and body much as with our world, and

changing them in the process. Motivating the choice of words, accordingly, is taking a position on how things should be, and learning to choose them a process of *Bildung*.

These, in sum, are my conclusions. The remainder of Part II works them out in more detail. After this chapter last, there will be a Part III, but it will be much, much shorter, sketching some outlooks in directions in which these views can be made to look more realistic, perhaps even empirical.

Most of the argument about culture as a problem and distinguished by its incoherences derives from that of Ernest Gellner in *Thought and Change* and *Legitimation of Belief*. Both works also supply some fine examples of to do things with ideals. I will discuss two of these examples briefly to show how they could inform the use and interpretation of ‘*Bildung*’.

In *Thought and Change*, Gellner developed the idea (worked out in three later books) that nationalism is part of the modernizing process, because developed states require state education, and maintain cultural complexity by imposing a certain amount of homogeneity. (Which has been documented, elaborately, in Eugen Weber’s *Peasants into Frenchmen*.) This would make nationalism the outcome of rather than the reaction against the French Revolution, among whose most lasting results were, after all, state education and conscription (perhaps more than legal equality, or representative government). To function in a modern state you must be literate – Gellner says, *each man a clerk* – and this in turn requires centres of learning and teaching for the teachers.<sup>117</sup> In such circumstances, I would add, *Bildung* might well serve one’s emancipation better than *Aufklärung*.

*Legitimation of Belief* offers a functionalist redescription of philosophies that pretend to give knowledge and morals a rational basis, like utilitarianism. Logically, at least in Gellner’s logics, utilitarianism *should have been* an ethic for pigs: its crucial premiss that *nothing exists except sensation* is an argument for unrestricted psychedelia. The term ‘happiness’ is empty as an explanation of what people want, because it means precisely that: what people want. But in the hands of ‘consistent, serious and courageous thinkers’, who were well aware of these undesirable implications, it became instead a guide to unprejudiced critical deliberation for the common good. ‘Our society still lives by that programme... Despite all the logically manifest implications of their views, drug-taking, orgiastic sensuality, and the like, simply were not part of the life-style of Bentham or the Mills.’<sup>118</sup> How, from this perspective, to use *Bildung*? What Snell called ‘the curse of everything pedagogical’ must have been a clear and present danger to its users; but as consistent and serious thinkers they took it as an incentive to increase knowledge and unmask edifying fables, rather than tell them again. (Not all its users were consistent, or courageous, enough to do that.)

Gellner’s functional redescrptions seem to leave little room for argument. Either ideals work through individual calculation, or through some system beyond one’s control, but giving reasons has at best a marginal function to it. Actually, this is not quite the case. It is hard to make calculations when you

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<sup>117</sup> *Thought and Change*, ch. 7. I am sorry to remark that three books did not add much to this chapter.

<sup>118</sup> *Legitimation of Belief*, pp. 116-8

don't know what you're up to, and not everything that is beyond your control is a system. *Legitimation of Belief* stresses the normative nature of all thought: the common-sensical and social origins of belief and desire are reason to distrust them, but you cannot sit back and watch things happen, or follow 'feeling' or 'commitment', so the best thing to do is to follow a consistent course of selection.

Let me offer another redescription. If this consistent course of selection is a description of how ideals work, then it assigns both a critical and a constitutive role to them in finding words and deeds coherent. To know what you are up to, you must know what others are up to, and to make sense of what they say and do, you and they must see the implications of their words and deeds. This is not pure calculation, it is legitimation of belief, action and meaning. The interpreter is in a constant state of radical interpretation with regard to what implications are being drawn, and which ones cancelled – for *his own* words and deeds as well. *By the same token*, he is motivating them; and if this motivation is consistent, and normative, and inconclusive, then it is an ideal.

What *are* ideals, then? Principles of selection? In the mind of good people, perhaps, but in the evil world of public argument, they can just as well be conversation-stoppers. (Gellner justifies the use of normative principles with a metaphor: if you are lost, stick to one direction for at least it will get you somewhere. Not a bad metaphor but a strange argument against pluralism and relativism, as it is intended.) The best thing to say about their public use is that they function as metalinguistic expressions: container concepts that indicate how one wants to be understood, and what (action, belief, expression) follows from what.

There is no core set of 'indispensable ideals' just as there is no strict distinction between ideals and 'nonteleological' terms. (Think of how 'greed', which is normally a description of how people behave and shouldn't, becomes an ideal in Gordon Gekko's speech in *Wall Street*.) But there is no getting round words like 'polite', 'liberal', 'romantic', 'religious', 'progress', 'Art', 'Science', if you want to make sense of what people mean. Linguists may like laboratory conditions, but you cannot even buy red apples without being polite, and when it comes to motivation and relevance, you will find better examples of how to find things meaningful in historical research than in most work on pragmatics.

It is the ascription of motivations, in terms of their logical and active implications, more than any 'influence' or 'accumulation' or 'material progress of time', that constitutes continuity in the history of ideas. For this permits to see words and deeds as actions on a specific moment, while at the same time keeping the conflict over the implications vivid long after their actual effectiveness has worn out. What would otherwise have been a timeless heap of statements or a surface layer of talk over the steady flow of history becomes, in this conflict over what followed from what, a matter of relevance, in the double sense of inherent motivation and meaning to be assigned. These matters of relevance show the historical interpretation *at conflict with*, rather than engulfed in or inventing the past. For the interpretation draws implications that the actor may not have liked or understood, while at the same time putting to the test the historian's own capacity for drawing implications. In that sense, historical interpretation can stand as a model for the philosophy of language much as the other way round.

That said, these ascriptions do not *explain* how to draw implications, they merely license and cancel them. What they do is important enough: they define the speaker as something that he or she may or may not like to be called, or give a name to one's predicament. That is as much of a formative role as can be given to them, and that formative role is well captured in the notion of *Bildung*, which can motivate, like a meta-ideal, these ascriptions, licensings and cancellations. Neither ideals, nor *Bildung* (as McDowell believes), *constitutes* our linguistic competence, or informs an applicable semantics or pragmatics. What the notion of *Bildung* *does*, less spectacularly, is designating theories of interpretation as normative positions. The use of ideals is an example of how these norms can be flouted: there is nothing that replaces the need for theories of action and linguistics, but drawing restrictions creates transgressions, and such transgressions are an essential part of language and action. Ideals, one could say, are not operative within a well-defined competence, or nomological slack, but tug to extend it. What I mean by that fills the second part of my argument.

Much of this thesis has been an application of Davidsonian arguments. I have not gone deeply into the details of Davidson's semantics and theory of action, but rather discussed Rorty and McDowell's attempts to make his philosophy of language say 'Bildung', and token these arguments into the realm of historical interpretation. Although I have devoted much more attention to Rorty's pretendedly Davidsonian position, my own use of *Bildung* is more like McDowell's comparison of language and cognition to the moulding of the ethical character. However, his use of *Bildung* is an exculpation where we want explanations. I do not pretend to offer better explanations, but by designating theories of interpretation as normative positions, the notion of *Bildung* becomes a means of metatheoretical reflection and critique. Without such critique, theories of interpretation are free-spinning.

Nothing I have said about ideals or *Bildung* so far would classify as a theory according to Davidsonian standards. Davidson's Meaning Theory does not involve reference to reality, assume the existence of 'meanings' or show a difference between descriptive and evaluative terms. It describes structural and equivalence relations between parts of sentences.<sup>119</sup> His 'Unified Theory of Thought, Meaning and Action' does not assume that 'any propositional attitudes of the speaker are available', and 'When we turn for enlightenment about the nature of language to the private and community interests that prompt language, we lose touch with the questions that interest us if we do not beg them.'<sup>120</sup> That is why Davidson describes interpretation as radical interpretation.

As an argument against conventionalism and contextualism, this applies very well to McDowell's use of *Bildung*. It also rejects the possibility of working the role of ideals in reasoning into a model. But it does not preserve Davidson's own model from being designated as a normative position, or, if you like, an ideal. Davidson's position, in plain words, is that 'a chair' is not a chair, it is a word, and no matter how many descriptions you heap on it, it does not become a chair. No semantic notion of

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<sup>119</sup> 'Truth and Meaning', in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, p. 31

<sup>120</sup> 'A Unified Theory of Thought, Meaning and Action', in *Problems of Rationality*, pp. 151-2

meaning or reference, therefore, can connect ‘chairs’ to chairs. McDowell’s concept of *Bildung* makes the world say ‘chair’ to us, because concepts are second nature, and our descriptions do not stop anywhere short of reality. Although I think this treats language as magic (again), there is a genuine point in it, that shows Davidson’s model as a normative ideal: what makes statements about chairs liable to modelling and propositional ascription? Why is a chair not a proposition, or ‘a chair’ not a proposition, but ‘I sit on a chair’ something to be called *p*?

The reason, for Davidson, is that only well-formed sentences can supply a constructive model for the language. In type logic, only expressions of type *s* can have a truth value. What we *do* with expressions is not his business; the model does not describe a language governed by learned rules and conventions, for no such thing exists. (This is also why Davidson believes that metaphors mean nothing, because they belong to the domain of use.) The charity of counting most of the speaker’s beliefs true is required to map his expressions unto ours, and the constitutive ideal of rationality warrants the logical form of the semantic structure. But this model is not ‘language’ any more than rules and conventions are language. It formulates structurally valid inferences (Gareth Evans’ phrase)<sup>121</sup> to model public language use. That is, it employs formalized language as a model for language.

But what is this model of structurally valid inference a model for? It does not map what goes on in the mind of the speaker, for on basis of how public language reflects a choice of words alone, there is no distinction to be made between logical and psychological processes. Sentences are made also by rhyme, rhythm, association, humour, imagination, involuntary response etc. There may be logic in it, but why should human language be the model for logic? Computers don’t care much for human language: they beat us at chess, but they still fail Turing’s test. Subatomic particles do not have the language competence to understand Heisenberg’s theorem. On basis of observable behaviour, should we apply to them the same charity? We may have the capacity for structurally valid inference, but that does not tell us how to use it.

This is where creativity in reasoning comes in, and with that the ideal of *Bildung*. The semantic model for structurally valid inference does not rule over implicature, ellipsis, imaginative language use, idiom, intonation etc. (Malapropism and clumsy formulation are a different affair: you can say that radical interpretation models them as a ‘foreign language’.) But neither do contexts or conventions. No amount of contexts or conventions will turn the phrase ‘a chair’ into a complete sentence, for there are infinitely many to be made for making the implicature explicit: ‘give me a chair’, ‘this is a chair’, ‘I want that chair’, etc. Still, it works to get the chair moved. The semantic model poses an ideal standard for how such implicatures are to be made explicit. It may be a model of the logical deep structure of language, but the possibility to perceive language as structured at all depends on something different: motivation. Reasons, implicatures, questions and answers require motivation, and without that, there is

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<sup>121</sup> ‘Semantic Structure and Logical Form’, in Gareth Evans and John McDowell (eds.), *Truth and Meaning. Essays in Semantics*, passim

nothing for the semantic model to make explicit. Drawing a strict distinction between inference and implicature, between semantics and pragmatics, leaves the model free-spinning in its own ideal rationality.

Every act of creative reasoning disturbs this semantic paradise. Ellipsis takes a shortcut on structurally valid inference, and so challenges us to make explicit how it could say so much with so little. The logic behind it may be analogous to that of the model, but such analogies can be disputed. Metaphors and jokes can be explained to some extent, and pursued consistently, but that alone does not make them metaphors or jokes, although they couldn't do without semantic structure. They blend the logics and psychology that underlie language use into a bittersweet cocktail. Non-verbal communication, touching on the borders of intentional and unintentional, conventional and mechanical, in carrying implications, is a comment upon that Davidsonian anathema: the verbalization of experience. (Perhaps the same goes for art.) New ideas break in upon the existing inferential relations. All this is not happy play. We are at conflict with our own language capacity as we are with those who interpret us, trying to get across what we mean with a capacity for language processing that is neither logically nor psychologically transparent.

Knowledge, even of how the speaking machinery works, will not take away the need for motivation. Not just because knowledge requires reasons, but also because without an assumption of relevance, the principle of Charity is vacuous. The assumption that people have largely true beliefs does not guarantee that they speak in largely true propositions. Even giving and asking for reasons, sometimes, is just a game. Charity can only be applied critically, under the assumption that at least part of what is said has information value and implications. That, in turn, assumes that hearers (tacitly) evaluate motivations. That is creative reasoning rather than reconstruction, because intentions are not hidden sentences. Without the option of making motivations explicit, the notion of 'relevance' would be vacuous as well.

No amount of creativity will turn 'a chair' into a chair, or make a chair say 'chair'. That is why language use is in a nomological slack, and why there are ideals at work in reasoning. The use of *Bildung* that I recommend is a critical one in that it implores one to distrust common sense, dissect the beautiful machinery that makes one speak, and fight the horror of hearing oneself talk platitudes. It calls for tact, imagination, a desire to know, and a cold strategic eye, a sharp-eyed choice of words. Most of all, it says: elaborate ideals. In the approach to knowledge sketched in chapter II.3, and in the way in which I have been drawing ideals from theories of interpretation for history and language, this goes together with the desire for knowledge rather than against it. The more we know, the more there is still to be known.

One final try, then. What are ideals, and how do they work?

There are no isolable entities called ideals, not in history or linguistics, nor in psychology, nor on the market-place. What I call ideals are coherent conceptions of how things should be, which are implicit



in the assumption that belief is both normative and coherent, in the motivation of expressions, and in the relation between what we know and what we do. That is a vague definition, because there is little to *know* about what they are. (What are conceptions? How should things be?) Ideals belong to the realm of reasons, beliefs, motivations and meanings that make it possible for something to count as knowledge. That does not put them beyond scrutiny – much the opposite, in the critical view I am defending, without scrutiny they would not *be* – but makes them play hide and seek with knowledge. ‘Knowledge’ about ideals is possible only in a derivative sense, as intellectual history, or as ‘know how’ of making them explicit.

There are two dangers. The first is that it makes ideals sufficiently vague to apply to anything. It seems that if you want to assign a constitutive role to ideals in reasoning, you will have to describe every act or utterance as motivated, every motivation constituted by ideals, and everything motivated an ideal construct. That is not the case. Inferring that people are just talking, or acting on insufficient or incoherent motivation, is perfectly permissible. As an agent, too, you can opt out every point, refuse to give reasons, not make yourself explicit, shy from critical reflection, act at will, choose your words carelessly or not at all. None of this will put you beyond scrutiny. You will still find yourself described and measured in terms of other people’s ideals. In the ongoing conflict of language, the place of collective singulars is secure.

The second danger is to view ideals as a matter of speaking. Because ideals need words to be made explicit, and because motivations, inferences and facts are expressed in language, one might describe language as reason’s safe playground, in which it can dream up conceptions of how things should be. Or alternately, one might hold that ideals come up only when we push the game of giving and asking for reasons too far, as a by-product of language use. That, too, is wrong. Language is no safe playground, and drawing a limit to reasoning is to transgress it. Ideals must be posited precisely to escape non-explanation, to demand motivation where words run short. This goes for deeds and things as much as for words. The probing nature of our deeds and beliefs, and the ongoing conflict of language, make non-explanation a weak way of opting out. The realization that a) our beliefs do not stop anywhere short of the world, b) we do not know how we process language, and c) words are deeds, should teach us better.

The ideal of *Bildung*, to end with that, is commendable only if it teaches us to judge and to risk, to judge knowingly, sensitively and responsibly, to know what we are doing, to choose our words, to face the motivated judgement and dispel the easy judgement of others, to be committed and to act. This means that sometimes, inevitably, we call upon ourselves ‘the curse of everything pedagogical’, and sometimes, we must know when not to be virtuous. But no ‘tragic’ or ‘realistic’ view will do away with either ideals or critique. Without making too much of human rationality, the conclusion goes that without ideals, we are not truly reasoning. But an analysis of the role of ideals in reasoning will never substantiate this claim into a positive fact: it will always be, simultaneously, a critique of ideology.

Nothing about the ‘conflict view’ of ideals in reasoning commits us to idealize conflict. As Clifford

Geertz said in the case of the drunk Indian and the kidney machine, 'I cannot see that either more ethnocentrism, more relativism, or more neutrality would have made things any better (though more imagination might have)'.<sup>122</sup> The 'might have', between brackets, is a good thing here. With a cold strategic eye, we must not lose sight of harsh realities and the ideals at work in them, use our imagination critically, pursue ideals to their undoing, and hate fate. This is the ideal of Bildung that motivated this thesis. You can call that, although I do not like the phrase, 'a constitutive ideal of Bildung.'

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<sup>122</sup> 'The Uses of Diversity' in *Available Light. Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, p. 81

### **III. Bildung**

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## By Way of Epilogue

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Something seems to have gone wrong. *Bildung macht Frei!* was the slogan that sold the *Groschen-Bibliothek der Deutschen Klassiker für alle Stände*, est. 1826. By that time, the Schlegel brothers were working for Metternich. In Munich and Berlin, too, Schelling and Hegel were making themselves useful for the state and the king. Humboldt had withdrawn from public life. Children at the gymnasium spent most of their time being drilled into Latin and Greek; proposals to give modern languages and science a larger role in the curriculum had to emphasize that these were *useless* too, in order to ward off the suspicion of ‘utilitarianism’.<sup>123</sup> In Thomas Mann’s novel *Buddenbrooks*, when Lübeck joins the German State, Prussian schoolmasters come to enforce the categorical imperative of Master Kant. Harry Graf Kessler, after a British education, was shocked to find the German students doing sports in collars. When Jean-François Lyotard speaks of Bildung in *La Condition Postmoderne*, he ends the chapter with Heidegger’s rectoral address. He could have found worse things in Fichte’s *Reden an die Deutsche Nation*, 1807/08.

Is it a requiem for a dream, then, to talk about Bildung? I began the introduction with a German Mandarin at Harvard and Donald Davidson who would not swallow the bait. Kant did something similar when he refused a post at Jena. In his review of Herder’s *Ideen*, Kant accused the author of using vacuous teleological principles at leisure. Snell’s review of *Paideia* echoes that argument: Jaeger’s edifying history, like Herder’s *Ideen*, is built upon vacuous teleological principles. And Lyotard describes Bildung as a dangerous attempt to legitimate knowledge, one that forces dispersed language games into a speculative unity, the ‘life of the spirit’.<sup>124</sup> If you have to buy *that* to use the word Bildung approvingly, better leave it on the shelf.

Let’s not neglect the merits of the Bildung revolt. They were mentioned before. It brought the exact sciences into the university, and made history and linguistics scientific. It gave a massive impulse to literary and musical culture, and it even promoted the spread of the Brockhaus encyclopedia. In many ways, it was part of the modernization process – what Ernest Gellner calls *each man a clerk*. In a historical ontology of how many novelties were introduced into our lives in the age of Humboldt, the term ‘Bildung’ has pride of place. But that does not make ‘Bildung’ a license for free speculation. It is not an argument for Bildung now.

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<sup>123</sup> Daniël Lechner, *Bildung macht Frei! Humanistische en realistische vorming in Duitsland, 1600-1860*, p. 167

<sup>124</sup> *La Condition Postmoderne*, ch. 9

What has been said in the above about the role of ideals in reasoning *is* an argument for *Bildung heute* – not because knowledge requires a speculative foundation but because it requires motivation, coherence and critique. Speculation alone will not bring this about. Working out ideals *will* contribute to it, but only if it is done systematically, taking existing knowledge into account. This is my description of what philosophers do when they address ‘fundamental issues’. I would demand, then, that philosophers elaborate ideals.

In this thesis, I have defended creativity in reasoning, a conflict view of language, thinking with history, the choice of words – and called that *Bildung*. Also, I have argued against non-explanation, contexts, canons, language as magic, ironism, and philosophical therapy. If I have speculated, I hope not to have used vacuous teleological principles at leisure. To disclaim this charge, and to explain my choice of the word ‘*Bildung*’, I end by pointing out three further perspectives, in the philosophy of language, history, and art.

### CREATIVITY IN REASONING

In Daniel Dennett’s *Consciousness Explained*, there is a cartoon of two scientists before a blackboard. On the blackboard are formulas, an arrow, ‘then a miracle occurs...’, another arrow, and more formulas. One scientist comments: ‘I think you should be more explicit here in step two.’<sup>125</sup>

Creativity in reasoning is such a miracle. People do not only make novel sentences, they understand full sentences by hearing or reading part of them, respond to suggestion and implication as if it were outspoken, get stuck in the middle of a sentence and complete those of others, and process metaphor, ellipsis, malapropism, with no significant lag in processing time. An explanation of this as digression from a given structure (either mental hardware, or cultural software) would require so many transgression clauses that it would collapse under auxiliary hypothesis. There is mental hardware and cultural software, but the two don’t make a language machine.

Creativity in reasoning is also a fact of life. If we reject the Myth of the Given, there is no deduction from a chair to ‘chair’, and what inferences are correct is determined in an ongoing discursive conflict, not by the underlying structure. I have referred to two theories of inference, Robert Brandom’s semantic inferentialism and Sperber & Wilson’s relevance theory. Neither of them is satisfactory.

Robert Brandom assumes that knowledge is exhausted by ‘discursive commitments’ to make explicit what you mean. Discursive practices depend on ‘material inference’ from one statement to the other, and logical vocabulary serves to make explicit which inferences are formally valid, which express factual relations, moral commitments etc., and which are false. Explicitation is made possible, according to Brandom, by phenomena inherent in language: substitution, anaphora, and  $\theta$ -clauses.

The problem is that Brandom believes knowledge comes in sentences. The question *why* such sentences are made does not arise, because he is offering a functional theory of concepts, not a theory

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<sup>125</sup> *Consciousness Explained*, p. 38; the cartoon is by Sidney Harris.

of concept formation,<sup>126</sup> and holds that intentions do not explain language games, but emerge within language games.<sup>127</sup> Since you cannot deduce a sentence from an object, Brandom assumes it must be caused by an object. Caused? How? Including syntax, idiom, ellipsis, metaphor, *et cetera*? You may call this the Myth of the Given Sentence. Make it explicit, Bob, make it explicit.

Sperber and Wilson, in *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, reject the ‘code model’: the idea that communication proceeds by encoding thought in language, and depends on mutual knowledge sufficient to decode it. Encoding is a mechanical process, and putting something in code does not show it to be of interest: bees and computers can do it. What is relevant, Sperber and Wilson hold, cannot be encoded, it must be inferred, and it can be because all *ostensive* communication proceeds by the Principle of Relevance: it ‘communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance.’<sup>128</sup>

So we can skip unnecessary words, and say ‘a chair’ to ask for a chair; or add ‘please’, which shows that we respect the hearer; be ironic to show we are not stupid; use metaphor for short, or to make our talk less boring; say A and mean B, which follows from A; and so on. The problem is how to measure relevance. Sperber and Wilson measure it in ‘contextual effect’, which is a vague measure to use in a model of tacit processing. Worse, their relevance theory is built *on top* of a mentalistic philosophy of language: ‘Linguistically encoded semantic structures are abstract mental structures which must be inferentially enriched... to communicate anything of interest.’<sup>129</sup> They assume a semantics in which words denote concepts in the language of thought. My objections are obvious: you can’t write things in the language of thought by putting them in capitals, ‘context’ is not an exact magnitude in a model that aims at predictive accuracy, linking words to concepts does not make them meaningful, but just begs the question what concepts mean, there are no rules for innovation, conflict and transgression, and if optimalization were a mechanical process, how come that we make such poor sentences in spoken language? From relevance theory, the rejection of the code model and the assumption of relevance are worth retaining, but that’s about it.

We can’t put these two theories of inference in a blender. They don’t blend. Inferential semantics postulates sentence primacy and Wittgenstein’s anti-private-language argument; relevance theory assumes an underlying conceptual semantics, and an essential difference between coding-decoding and inference. Robert Stainton has attempted to make such a cocktail anyhow, in chapter 8 of his *Words and Thoughts*, and called it a ‘Positive Representational - Pragmatic View’. What is commendable about that book is that it argues at length against the Myth of the Given sentence: Stainton argues at length against the view that ‘sentencehood’ is a sufficient and exhaustive condition

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<sup>126</sup> He justifies this with a quote from Sellars: ‘what was needed was a functional theory of concepts which would make their role in reasoning, rather than supposed origin in experience, their primary feature.’ (‘Autobiographical Reflections’, in *Action, Knowledge and Reality*, ed. Hector-Neri Castañeda, p. 285; quoted in *Articulating Reasons: an Introduction to Inferentialism*, p. 25)

<sup>127</sup> *Making it Explicit. Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, pp. 252-259

<sup>128</sup> *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, p. 158

<sup>129</sup> *idem*, p. 178

for propositional ascription. (Kent Bach, for that matter, has made the same argument against the more-Davidsonian-than-Davidson semantic minimalism of Lepore *et al.*) But his attempt to make elliptic expressions say *p* is less convincing. If you reject the Myth of the Given Sentence, then you should not attempt to turn semisentences into full ones by means of implicatures, explicatures, implicitures, or material inferences. A better try would be to abjure the distinction between grammar and lexicon, as is done in construction grammar.

This suggestion is not a panacea. There is little in construction grammar to give the philosophy of language discussed in this thesis a linguistic footing: what its versions by Fillmore, Goldberg, Croft and others have in common is that they identify constructions with cognitive structures. There are some assumptions, behind William Croft's *Radical Construction Grammar* in particular, that meaning creation is an active process, that language as a predefined structure does not exist, and that 'grammaticalization, and language change in general, originates in the variation inherent in the verbalization of experience',<sup>130</sup> that are closer in spirit to radical interpretation and Brandom's expressivism. But with the present state of linguistic and philosophical theory, it would be bad philosophy and unsound linguistics to cocktail them.

The case for creativity in reasoning is not made more convincing by choosing a pet linguistic theory. This would only contaminate language research with vacuous teleological principles. Rather, what *can* be done without risk of transgression is to view linguistic theory itself as a type of 'creativity in reasoning'. The ongoing state of conceptual anarchy in linguistics provides a vivid spectacle of ideals in reasoning at work, a struggle of conceptions of what 'language' and its 'explanation' should be, and attempts at limitation. Without pretending to do linguistics, philosophers of science can chart these border regions of philosophy and science, putting these ideals and attempts at scrutiny. For defenders of creativity in reasoning, the state of conceptual anarchy in linguistics is perhaps the best of possible worlds.

## THE BILDUNG REVOLT

It has been some thirty years now since *Konstellationsforschung* shook up philosophical scholarship of the Age of German Idealism, and the dust seems to have settled somewhat. 'Konstellationsforschung' is a programme championed by Dieter Henrich and Manfred Frank, which works on the assumption that the meteoric development of speculative thought in the 1790's cannot be explained from the exegesis of single brilliant minds, but only as the result of debates and correspondence, in groups engaged in 'symphilosophieren' and in wider philosophical networks. This research has done a lot to affirm the position of Hölderlin and the Early Romantics as original and systematic thinkers, and given pride of place to such supposedly marginal figures as Erhard, Niethammer, Sinclair, Diez, Zwilling, and Hülsen. In its quest to get exact who conveyed what to whom when, it has been true to the

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<sup>130</sup> 'The origins of grammaticalization in the verbalization of experience', abstract, to appear



principles of Quentin Skinner and the Cambridge School, except that it is still in search of hidden great insights. This has been manifest in Henrich's reading of Hölderlin's enigmatic fragment *Urtheyl und Seyn* as a turning point in intellectual history, and even more in Frank's advertisement of his own *Unendliche Annäherung*:

[D]ie philosophierende Frühromantik – vor allem in Gestalt ihrer Hauptvertreter Novalis und Friedrich Schlegel – [bildet] ein merkwürdiges Hybrid zwischen orthodoxem Kantianismus, dessen Ideen-Lehre stark ausgelegt wird, und spekulativem Idealismus, dessen grundsatzphilosophische Züge skeptisch überwunden werden, noch bevor sie in Schellings und Hegels Systementwürfen zum freien Flug ansetzen. Diese Anlage hat dafür gesorgt, das von den großen Projekten dieser Zeit [...] eigentlich nur die der Frühromantik von einer skeptischen, aber perfektibilistisch eingestellten Moderne haben übernommen werden könnten. Während um Schelling und Hegel eine antiquarische Philologie sich bemüht, die aus der Asche kein Feuer mehr blasen kann, scheinen die Gedanken der Frühromantik brandaktuell geblieben. Freilich sind sie – umgekehrt proportional zu ihrem Ruhm – allererst zu entdecken.<sup>131</sup>

Among the critics of *Konstellationsforschung*, Frederick Beiser has been most remarkable, claiming that this 'postmodern' reading of Early Romanticism neglects their political and ethical agenda, the continuity between their thought and Enlightenment ideals, and the central role of 'Bildung' in it. Thus, it 'provides further support for the traditional interpretation. According to Henrich and Frank, the young romantics postulated a realm of being that transcends all reflection, judgement, or rational cognition, and that is presentable only through the medium of art.'<sup>132</sup>

That criticism is correct. Bildung is not an issue for Henrich and Frank, whose concern is with metaphysics and the relation between romantic theories of art and of knowledge. What they find distinctive are doctrines like *Ironie* and *Wechselerweis*, *Ur-Theylung* and *Ur-Seyn*. I find little to disagree with Beiser, but the rub is that his own work on the period contains nothing very new, and the work of Frank and Henrich does.

Comparing Romantic to modern views, as they do, does not make either view relevant. The comparisons may well be justified, but give no answer to present philosophical problems, nor a proof of historical significance. (Although it is remarkable to read Manfred Frank attributing to Schlegel a 'coherence theory of truth and knowledge',<sup>133</sup> and also to see Andrew Bowie comparing McDowell and Davidson to Early Romantic epistemology the other way round,<sup>134</sup> those comparisons will not lend legitimacy to my own somewhat romantic arguments either.) One could do *Konstellationsforschung* without them; in that sense, Beiser's argument for Bildung is not an argument against *Konstellationsforschung* per se, but against the way it has been done. Henrich's and Frank's concern with metaphysics and art is all right as it goes, but their neglect of Bildung sets their history of ideas

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<sup>131</sup> "Unendliche Annäherung." *Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik*, p. 2

<sup>132</sup> *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism*, pp. 58-9

<sup>133</sup> "Unendliche Annäherung", pp. 522-3

<sup>134</sup> 'John McDowell's *Mind and World*, and Early Romantic Epistemology', in *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 50 (1996), pp. 515-54

free-spinning.

Bildung may not have been especially distinctive of the Early Romantics, but their contribution to philosophy was, if anything, a contribution to conceptions of how things should be. These conceptions, with some poetic leisure, can be used to name a period, the Bildung Revolt, a revolt of which the Romantics were part. The notion of Bildung may not have been the most original or the most metaphysical of their doctrine, but it is was ties them up with the science, politics and culture of their time. The motivations of the Romantics are hard to describe without using the word Bildung – as they did themselves, although with varying frequency. The Bildung Revolt, not the Romantic Revolt, because there were non-Romantics involved too, and ‘Bildung’ would have been acceptable to them as well. Only, they would not have meant the same thing by it. That is why Bildung is not a ‘paradigm’ in any Kuhnian sense. But as a constitutive ideal in reasoning, it was an inescapable part of reality.

The kind of research I recommend is exemplified by the Kant studies of Michael Friedman and John Zammito, who show the problems of Kant as more concrete but not less difficult by describing them as problems in the construction and development of fields of science, and in the redefinition of the philosophical enterprise. Beiser points in the same direction, especially in his chapter on ‘Kant and the *Naturphilosophen*’, where he claims that ‘there is only a distinction of degree, and not in kind, between Schelling, Hegel, and Novalis on the one hand and Blumenbach, Kiemeier and [A. v.] Humboldt on the other.’<sup>135</sup> None of this is in complementary with Konstellationsforschung per se.

Michael Friedman has suggested a Cassirerian view on the history of philosophy and the cultural and exact sciences. For Friedman, this means that scientific, ethical and aesthetic judgement exist alongside each other in a Kantian triad, and that scientific concepts are built creatively on top of other symbolic forms (myth, language, art), each with their own constructive principles, but held together by a unity of meaning.<sup>136</sup> What I dislike about this, despite the appeal to creativity in reasoning, is that it presents symbolic systems as conceptual schemes that create a world, and that it makes assumptions about the ‘mythopoeic’ structure of primitive thought similar to Gadamer’s *grundsätzliche Metaphorik*. In accordance to my claims in chapter 3 of Part II, I would rather see an analysis of discursive strategies in which the cross-relations between means of expression are established in an ongoing conflict, and the creation of new fields of knowledge and the struggle over delimitations go together. Methodologically, this is closer akin to the analysis of ‘styles of reasoning’ suggested in Ian Hacking’s *Historical Ontology*. It is in such analysis, not in presenting ‘the great lines of spiritual development, of the ideal process, in which reality constitutes itself for us as one and many’<sup>137</sup>, that the role of ideals in reasoning can be traced.

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<sup>135</sup> *The Romantic Imperative*, p. 156

<sup>136</sup> *A Parting of the Ways*, p. 102

<sup>137</sup> *idem*; the phrase is from the English translation of Cassirer’s *Philosophie der Symbolischen Formen*.

## LIFE AS ART

Bildung appears twenty times in Adorno's *Ästhetische Theorie*, never positive. It appears as *Bildungsglaube*, -privileg, -philister, and even -geschwätz. For Adorno, obviously, *Bildung heute* was like poetry after Auschwitz – hypocrisy. And yet, it is clear enough that Adorno is also drafting a theory of aesthetic education and showing off general erudition – both for critical use, perhaps, not to be commodified, but an ideal to call Bildung all the same. If the *mot juste* has become a term of abuse, then something has gone wrong.

The problem is obvious. We need not go waxing postmetaphysical about it. Bildung is a commodity. If art, language, history and general erudition make you a better person, the good citizen has a simple recipe for self-improvement. I have been on *Italienische Reise*; I am better than you. I know x foreign languages; I am x times better than you. (Dead languages count double.) No wonder that Davidson backed away from Werner Jaeger. That guy was still thinking he was the biggest thing in the world.

The war did its bit to disqualify Bildung, surely. So did progress. It was much easier to say Bildung before there was mass production and a culture industry. Ironically enough, the spread of higher education worked to its discredit too.

What came in its stead? Postmodern thinkers like to speak of Life as Art. This ideal existed before postmodernism: the Victorian cult of the dilettante is an instance of it, and vitalism, and dandyism. Nietzsche and the Romantics are easily attributed with it. Even pragmatists hold it, as John Dewey's *Art as Experience* testifies. Michel Foucault has suggested the example of *ars erotica*, which he believes every culture but western culture has a tradition of. That may well be the worst example of all, worse than any dilettante, dandy, *homme vital* or *Übermensch*: an esoteric and exotic tradition of initiation, taking place in the dark. If that is what Life as Art is like, don't do it at home.

Life as Art is not a bad ideal, only it is a bit too flattering. It turns everything into art. The result is that, just as most art that is not functional or decorative, those living to it are often dull, uninteresting or pretentious, sometimes amusing, and only occasionally brilliant. If that comes at a price of obscurantism and ideosyncrasy, it is not worth it. Of course, defenders of Life as Art will say that they also defend solidarity, open-mindedness and a critical attitude. But then it is not much unlike Bildung anymore.

Adorno, who is not a defender of Life as Art, has been pointed enough to remark: 'Das Bedürfnis nach Kunst selbst ist weithin Ideologie, es ginge auch ohne Kunst, nicht nur objektiv sondern auch im Seelenhaushalt der Konsumenten'.<sup>138</sup> He means by that that the System he hates would go on functioning without the negative dialectical input of Art. Since I do not believe in the System, nor love to hate the modern world as much as he, that problem does not arise. Creativity in reasoning is a fact of life and so is the problem of finding words for what we experience and do. Even without these facts of life, we would still dance and decorate, but since we have long come out of the cave of Jones we

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<sup>138</sup> *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 361

also do it on purpose.

What would be worthwhile to investigate, without making such Myth-of-the-Given style assumptions as that art 'is pure experience' (Dewey) or that it 'shakes our conceptual schemes' (Adorno), is not so much how art relates to 'experience' as to the verbalization of it, the choice of the *mot juste*. In art as well as in language use, people try to make something interesting and relevant out of cognitive processes beyond their control. To communicate that presumption of relevance, works of art are at conflict with words: if what is interesting about could also be said ('plainly', without the higher meaninglessness of poetry), the work of art would be superfluous. That does not put art beyond critique; Schlegel's principle that art is incomplete without critique seems closer to the mark. Whether it is indeed as interesting as it pretends to be remains to be disputed, although such disputes are famously inconclusive, for the same reason that 'a chair' is not a chair.

My contention is that this conflict with words is a contribution to creativity in reasoning. Cognitive science, as it is now, is in no position to explain this conflict away, for the simple reason that words are the wrong currency to exchange for a picture. There is no such thing as a 'language of art': a piece of art is not a 'statement' that lends itself to paraphrase or propositional ascription. Still, people are *doing* something with it, and what they are doing cannot be motivated by seeing it as part of people's 'form of life' (experienced world, symbolic system), nor by some 'aesthetic ideal' that is at best a subject for the critique of ideology. What relates this to the verbalization of experience is that both how to do things with art, and how to do things with words, is massively underdetermined by experienced reality and motivation. Both are, indeed, a wager. The point is that the critique of art is also a motivation of the choice of words, an exploration of how the world prompts words; and that the use of artistic material (in the widest possible sense) is also a matter of knowledge, of the expressive potential of words, things, deeds and skills, of how to use and combine them.

Exploring the relation between art and the verbalization of experience means to view the increase of knowledge as a supplier of new means of expression, verbal and nonverbal, new experiences, and new problems of verbalization. It is neither cognitive science nor art critique, but cognitive science and art critique are part of it, both of them to stir the conflict with words rather than solve it. In charting the use of expressive material, more is done than looking into the artist's workshop: it is an exploration of what is available as expressive material, how to do things with words, sounds, images, techniques, designs, symbols, and what have you. Such investigation, if it is committed and systematic enough, may not yet deserve to be called science, but it deserves to be called – more than anything traditionally called by that name – *aesthetic education*. The central tenet is that, increasing our means of expression, the growth of knowledge need not make life more commodious (it has long escaped control and overview) but it does make life more like art.

In these days, there are black holes and superstrings, multimedia performances and machine art, riches of language natural and technical, obscure old books for sale on the internet, the whole Greek corpus online. There are also culture industry, throwaway consumer goods, talk talk from every corner, global

problems, undiminished obtuseness, and a larger proletariat than ever. It is too much *Schadenfreude* to poke fun at the uprooted Werner Jaegers of this world. Better to laugh at people like Richard Rorty, who think science has nothing to say and yearn for strong poetry. Not knowing is no option. Balancing between the language, history and art of science, and the science of language, history and art, as philosophers do, there is no magic word that will make life and knowledge more commodious, or end the itch of hearing ourselves speak. But 'Bildung' seems *le mot juste*.

*Amsterdam, January 2006-August 2007*



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